

This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + Refrain from automated querying Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at http://books.google.com/



BEAUTIFUL DREAM A Story of the Christ Child.



EVF.LANGBRIDGE.B.A.







and the second second

•

.

.

HER BEAUTIFUL DREAM.

Immediately—By the same Author, Crown Svo., Cloth, Price 4/-.

SONGS IN SUNSHINE:

LYRICS AND RHYMES ABOUT A BEAUTIFUL WORLD

AND A LIFE WORTH LIVING.

A few Opinions on Mr. Langbridge's published Poems:

"I think the "Fireman" and "Joe's Bespeak" as good in that line as anything ever written."—Gerald Massey.

"A fine touch of the lyre."-William Barnes.

[Of the longer poems] "I have read every poem attentively:—none are weak; many impressive; not a few excellent, in the adequacy of the expression, both in musicalness and colour, to the thing expressed."—Robert Browning.

"He has, too, as pretty a faculty of writing songs—real songs, with something of the genuine lyrical swing about them—as any one we have met with of late."—Spectator.

"Mr. Langbridge has attained to a wholly exceptional polish and grace of form and expression."—Scotsman.

Condon:

EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE: GREAT NEW STREET.



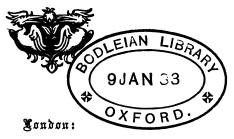
HER BEAUTIFUL DREAM:

A Story of the Christ-Child.

BY

THE REV. FREDERICK LANGBRIDGE, B.A.,

Author of "Gaslight and Stars," "Peacock Alley,"
"Mysteriously Missing," &c.



EYRE AND SPOTTISWOODE,
GREAT NEW STREET, FLEET STREET.

1882.

251 g 21/2

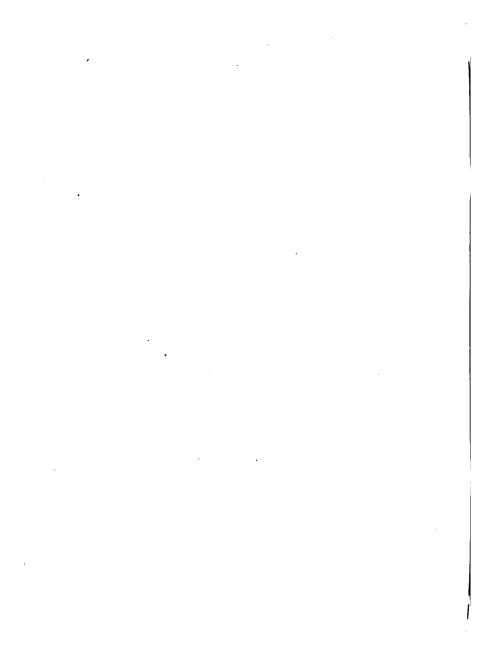
Printed by EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE, Shacklewell, E.

то

JANE LYDIA GRANT,

WITH HER NEPHEW'S

GRATITUDE AND LOVE. .



CONTENTS.

| | CHAP | rer. | I. | | | | PAGE |
|---------------------|----------|-------------|-------|--------|-------|------|------|
| GLADYS BEHAVES BA | DLY IN (| CHUI | сн | - | - | - | 1 |
| | CHAPT | ER | II. | | | | |
| GLADYS LISTENS TO T | THE SERI | MON | - | - | - | • | 13 |
| | CHAPT: | ER | III. | | | | |
| IF HE SHOULD COME | TO-DAY | • | - | - | - | - | 22 |
| | CHAPT | ER | IV. | | | | |
| JESUS COMES TO GLAI | DYS | • | - | - | - | - | 36 |
| | СНАРТ | ER | ٧. | | | | |
| THE COLLEGE, EDENDA | LE: PRI | NCIP. | AL—B | . RITS | on, e | 5Q., | |
| 1st B.A., UNIVER | SITY OF | LON | DON | - | - | - | 43 |
| | CHAPT | ER | VI. | | | | |
| A COMFORTABLE SITT | ING-ROOI | м, а | FEST | IVE I | KITCH | EN, | |
| AND A VERY DIS | MAL SCH | 0 0L | -ROOM | - | • | - | 49 |
| • | CHAPTI | er : | VII. | | | | |
| WHO HELPED MASTER | MORTON | то | WRIT | E HIS | LETT | rer | |
| HOME | - | - | - | - | - | - | 65 |

CONTENTS.

| CHAPTER VIII. | PAGE |
|--|------|
| WHAT CAME OF ELLA'S CHRISTMAS-MORNING PRAYERS | 76 |
| | |
| CHAPTER IX. | |
| LEONARD AND ELLA GET LEAVE TO BE AS SILLY AS | |
| EVER THEY PLEASE | 95 |
| • | |
| CHAPTER X. | |
| A SLIPPERY WALK, A WICKER-BASKET, AND A PLEASANT | |
| FAMILY GATHERING | 105 |
| | |
| CHAPTER XI. | |
| JESUS COMES TO LITTLE MARY | 117 |



HER BEAUTIFUL DREAM.

CHAPTER I.

GLADYS BEHAVES BADLY IN CHURCH.

GLADYS was not listening to the sermon one bit. I can't put it in any milder manner than that; I wish very much that I could, but I really don't see my way to it. I was thinking of saying,—"Gladys's thoughts were wandering from the sermon," but then, you know, neither thoughts nor anything else can wander from what they were never at, and it is certain that Gladys's thoughts were never anywhere near the sermon.

She had, indeed, mechanically found the text, because that was required of her by the authorities. Her father's first words at the dinner-table (they all dined at one on Sundays) were always addressed to Gladys, and

were these—"Well, little woman, and what was the text?"

Having qualified herself to answer that question, Gladys had this morning leaned back comfortably in her corner of the pew, and, maintaining all the while an appearance of decorous attention, had given her thoughts the rein. Having got the rein, helter-skelter away they went, leaving the grey pillars of the parish church far behind.

Now, in defence of my little Gladys, whom I love with all my heart, and whom I want you to love and think good and nice, I must say that her behaviour in church was not usually so reprehensible as to-day. In a general way it was all that can be expected of ten and a half. She found all her places (except two or three very difficult ones), repeated the responses in an audible voice, joined in the hymns with a will; in a word, did her best to make the prayers and praises of the church her own prayers and praises. During the sermon she never took her eyes off Dr. Braithwaite's skull-cap, and whenever she caught her thoughts wandering, she fetched them back with much severity. I dare not

say that she understood all (or any) of the Doctor's discourse; few, very few, could fathom Dr. Braithwaite's utterances. He was a learned man, and wore knee-breeches, and was universally respected; his sermons were listened to with great attention, and were spoken of as solid, sterling, profound. The Doctor had been a Wrangler (which was considered to be something at College), and his discourses were worthy of him, and of his knee-breeches. They suited the parish church, too, which was massive and venerable. Moreover, they lasted precisely half-an-hour, and you could with confidence order dinner for one o'clock. People had sat under Dr. Braithwaite for thirty years, and had never had to eat their mutton overdone through his eloquence. Whereas, when either of the curates preached (which, happily, was but seldom) there was no saying how you might find your jointraw or cindery. On the whole, therefore, the Doctor's sermons were held in high repute, but they were not understood.

Gladys, as I have said, generally listened to them with great respect. Now and then she was rewarded by hearing a familiar text, and on one or two memorable occasions the Doctor had quoted a few lines of poetry. Windfalls like these, however, were naturally few and far between, and as a rule Gladys's only recompense was the serene consciousness of never having lost sight of the Doctor's skull-cap (his eyes were not visible when he preached) during the whole half-hour.

How was it that Gladys was behaving so badly to-day?

It was Christmas Day. Now I know from painful experience that, in the case of much older people than Gladys, the decorations on that day sometimes prove of superior attractiveness to the sermon. Eyes belonging to quite grown-up persons, and surmounted by the very latest hats and feathers, keep wandering from pillar to window, and from window to arch, in admiration of the decorator's graceful handiwork; and if, at last, they settle on the pulpit, it is, alas! the monogram, and not the preacher, that draws them thither.

It was not, however, the decorations, tasteful as they were, that were distracting Gladys's attention; it was her cards. The postman had, of course, been very late that day. He

usually came between seven and eight; and if by any chance there was a letter for Gladys she got it as soon as she came down. But to-day he had not appeared till ten minutes past ten. Gladys was ready for church, and standing in the hall, in a fever of excitement lest she should have to start without receiving her cards, when, at last, the longed-for sliding and dropping were heard, and, running to open the box, she discovered that she was the happy recipient of thirteen letters.

There never was anything like the cards this year, she thought. Her first was a squirrel; the darlingest, darlingest squirrel, with the brightest eyes, and the sweetest tail, and the softest coat that ever squirrel had. Her next was a tiny black kitten with blue eyes, and a blue ribbon round her neck, arching her back, and lifting her baby paw to repel a great mastiff that had ventured within a couple of yards of her saucer. Then came a lovely winter scene, all a-sparkle with rime—a solemn sunset sky, fields deep in snow, a wide beech-wood, the snow whitening the bare arms of every tree; a narrow path through the wood, and, threading it, three delightful deer,

a stag, and two does. After that came—alas! I can't tell you what came after that. As soon as Gladys had opened the envelope, and before she had extracted the card, her father and mother entered the hall in their outdoor things, and a hurry. "Come little woman," said Mr. Arnold, feeling for his umbrella, "you must leave your cards till after church. We haven't a moment to lose; we are late as it is, I'm afraid."

"Just this one, papa," pleaded Gladys, "let me look at this one, and then I'll come."

"We can't wait even for that. Come along at once, Gladys."

Her papa took her hand, and the next moment she was walking briskly to church between him and Mrs. Arnold. But her heart was with her squirrel, her kitten, her deer, and her ten unknown treasures. It was hard, was it not, not only to leave behind three cards of approved fascination, but also not even to know what the ten other envelopes contained? If she had had her squirrel inside her prayer book, his tail would have been some comfort to her; but she had not had time to secrete him there, and, indeed, if she

had, her principles would have rejected his company in church.

She tried to be cheerful, and to make proper replies to her parents' remarks, but she could not manage it. The kitten, the deer, and the squirrel kept chasing one another through her brain, and their gambols, as might be expected, upset her ideas a good deal.

In church she succeeded pretty well for a little time in fixing her attention on the service, but before it was half over she was sadly aware that the envelopes, opened and unopened, were beginning to re-assert their sway; and long before the sermon began the battle between inclination and duty was over, and inclination remained master of the field.

So absorbed was she in various considerations and speculations concerning the postman's munificent donation, that she took very little notice of a circumstance which, had her mind been less engrossed, would have been of considerable interest to her. The preacher that morning was not the Doctor, nor even one of the curates; he was a complete stranger. Not half-a-dozen times in her memory had the pulpit been occupied by an

unknown clergyman, and on every previous occasion the event had caused quite a flutter of excitement in Gladys's breast. But this morning, beyond observing that he was a stranger, and that he was young, and that he wore a hood lined with white fur, she had taken no heed of the preacher. While she was looking out the text—it was St. Luke II. 7— . she was conscious of there being something peculiar—she would not have known how to describe it—in the young clergyman's voice and delivery. But she had hardly received this impression before preacher, church, and all her surroundings were swept away by a torrent of delightful recollections and eager guesses concerning her squirrel and his colleagues.

Who could have sent that seraphic squirrel? There was no inscription, and she did not recognize the handwriting of the address. Would she have any robins this year? She did so love robins; last year she had four. How many cards had Ella Lancaster had? Not thirteen—no, certainly not thirteen. True she had beaten Gladys last Christmas, but Gladys had only had six then. That great, big, big envelope must have some-

thing besides a card in it—it was tremendously heavy. How did they make cards sparkle like that dear deer-card? Perhaps it was diamonds ground very small on a nutmeggrater, and sprinkled over them.

Fancies and conjectures like these were playing puss-in-the-corner in Gladys's silly little head, when she became gradually aware of some curious sensation—whether in herself, or in the pew, or all over the church, she could not tell. At first she was vaguely conscious of its presence while she was thinking. A little later, it began to distract her attention, and at length to claim the whole of her attention. All this time the voice from the pulpit had been growing more and more audible, and not many minutes after first recognizing the sensation, she found herself listening with eager and absorbed interest to the preacher.

The church was intensely still; but there was nothing unusual about that. The congregation was orderly and decorous, and, save for the occasional thud of the verger's heavy hand on the head of a bluecoat boy, followed by a suppressed howl from the victim,

Dr. Braithwaite's discourses were ordinarily listened to in solemn silence. But there was something strange in this present silence; Gladys had felt the same sensation in the air during a heavy thunderstorm. Her own eyes were riveted on the preacher, and she knew that the eyes of every soul in the church were riveted on him, too. Although her attention never for a moment wandered from his words, she recognized a wonderful change in his appearance.

When he gave out the text his face was unimpressive, if not plain. He looked little more than a boy, and his slight stooping figure compared very disadvantageously with the straight and portly presence that usually filled the pulpit.

But now some glory had passed into his face. His pale cheek was flushed; his eyes were strangely bright; his plain features were kindled into splendour. The stoop had gone out of his shoulders. He stood erect and tall. His voice was somewhat harsh in tone, and had a curious vibration, and yet it seemed to catch and express his every shade of feeling. It was never loud, and sometimes it sank

almost to a whisper; yet Gladys was confident that not one word or intonation escaped the bluecoat boys in the great church's remote and shadowy corners. Now and then -- it was when it was very low-it produced in Gladys a sensation as of cold water trickling between her shoulders. She felt that that man's voice was the instrument on which his soul was playing. His progress through the sermon was not marked, as was that of most sermons which Gladys had heard, by the turning over at regular intervals of leaves. He was evidently clothing his thoughts in the words which suggested themselves at the moment, for sometimes he hesitated for a word—the hesitation seeming to give it additional force when it was found. He did not lean over the pulpit, in the attitude of a tradesman asking what was the next thing he could show you the attitude associated in Gladys's mind with pulpit eloquence. He stood, as I have already said, perfectly erect. His arms generally either hung by his side, or were crossed in front of him; but now and then a strong burst of feeling would extort from them a brief and emphatic action.

Gladys was face to face with a strong, tender, earnest soul, which was speaking—not reading—to hers, in natural, spontaneous language, a word which it evidently believed to be the Word of Life. The experience was new to Gladys, and to most of the worshippers in that church; the silence throbbed as they listened.



CHAPTER II.

GLADYS LISTENS TO THE SERMON.

"THERE was no room for them in the inn," the preacher said. "The census was being taken. Persons' names, in pursuance of the Jewish custom, were entered on the roll, not according to the house in which they slept on a given night (as is our mode of taking the census), but according to the place from which their family had sprung. Those who boasted that they were of the house and lineage of David were thronging from all parts of the country over which they had been dispersed into Bethlehem, the 'city of David.' The town was already full-when Joseph, leading the ass on which his young bride sat, entered it. Many of the visitors had, still resident in their ancestral town, friends of whose hospitality they might avail themselves. For the rest there was the khan or inn. A poor place it was, no doubt. A few small roofless chambers or cells were grouped around a guest-room, of decent size, but, like the

smaller chambers, without either furniture or roof. Outside these chambers—between them and the outer wall—run, through the whole extent of the building, an open space, which served the purpose of a stable. Here the oxen and asses belonging to the keeper of the khan, as well as the beasts and baggage of the guests, were quartered. Fodder was strewn upon the ground. In some khans the guest-room was a kind of platform, ascended by steps. The low wall which surrounded it was broad; occasional hollows scooped out of its coping fulfilled the office of mangers. Scanty accommodation the inn at best afforded—scanty protection from even Judæa's moderate winter—if winter was, as we love to think it was, the season of the Saviour's birth. But such poor accommodation as the chambers of the inn afforded was already tasked to its utmost. More important and better-paying visitors than the Galilean carpenter and his wife crowded its space. There was no room for them in the inn. Either —long and widely separated from ancestral town—they had no friends in Bethlehem, or else the houses of such friends as they had were already full; at any rate, there was no room for them in the town. There was no room for Mary, utterly worn and broken with the long journey from Nazareth. There was no room for the child that was to be born. In the stable—among the oxen and asses—the Virgin lodged. There the Christ was born. Perhaps this khan had those mangers, hollowed out of the stone, which some khans had. If so, it was probably in one of these—not unlike cradles in size and shape, and filled with soft hay—that the Mother laid her Baby. 'She brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.'

"Think of it—realize it, if you can! The Son of the Most High God, the Word of the Father, by Whom He made the heavens; the Almighty, the Infinite, the Eternal, lies in a manger. The Almighty is stilled by a mother's caress; the Infinite is held to a mother's breast. Realize it, if you can! It is the miracle of the ages; all other miracles are trivial beside this. You have heard the story so often that you have begun to regard it almost as a matter of course. You cannot

recall the time when you heard it first; it has grown up with you from babyhood. And so, perhaps, you have never realized it. But try and realize it now—God lies in a manger! What is a quenched sun or a powdered universe beside this?

"God comes down to His Own earth, and there is no room for Him!

"Cæsar had a sumptuous palace, but it was crowded with lusts, passions, intrigues: there was no room for the Christ there. no room in any mansion of ruler or grandee; they were all full of pomps and splendours and political cares—no room for Him. would not take Him in. But Lazarus at Dives' gate—he had some poor hovel, had he not? Was there no room for the Christ there? There was no lack of poor and hungry and toil-worn souls when God was born upon His earth. Ah no! when will there be? surely there was room for Him in some one of their bare and squalid homes. No fear of His being crowded out by the pomps and vanities of this wicked world there; there was room enough within those naked walls—room enough upon those mud floors. No thrilling passions,

no soft delights, no purple gauds to thrust Him forth there. Yes, empty enough, God knows, those hovels were of all the sweets and splendours of life. But the pains, the cares, the woes of life, how thickly they huddled in them! Disease and hunger, weariness and discontent, morose envy and dull despair, crouched together, shivering, moaning, snarling; not an inch of vacant space! No room—no room for Him!

"There was no room for Him in the inn. A well-filled purse might have made room, but Joseph had not that.

"There is room for Him in the stable. The beasts can spare Him a corner. The great wondering eyes of oxen are, perhaps, the first to gaze upon the Incarnate Son of God.

"But if He came again to-day, to tread that earth which two thousand years ago could spare Him only a manger for His cradle—which never gave Him a home,—over which he wandered hungering, sorrowing, pleading, a lifelong stranger,—which finally put Him to a shameful and agonizing death, sparing Him indeed a costly grave;—if, I say, He came back on this Christmas Day to the earth which

now professes itself His; which dates its history by His birth; which from all its hundred-thousand churches—built to His honour, called by His Name, fashioned to the shape of the Cross on which He died—sends up prayer and adoration to His throne at the Father's right hand;—if He came back to this Christian earth, on this Christmas Day, in the year of Christ 1882—would there be room for Him?

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock.' If He stood knocking to-day at Dives' gate, would Dives rise from his Christmas banquet to open and let Him in? He would not hear His knock; the laughter, the clatter, the jolly Christmas din, would drown the sound.

"If He beat at Lazarus' rickety door, would Lazarus bid Him lift the latch and come in? Lazarus would not hear Him—drunken ribaldry would drown the sound. This is the day of all the year which Lazarus consecrates to the gin-bottle; he would curse in Christ's Name, and never hear Him knock.

"He is with us now. He is standing in the midst of us gathered together in His Name;

His eyes look pleadingly into every heart—
'Is there still no room?' He asks. Make room for Him—in God's Name, I pray you, make room for Him. Let Him have the whole heart. Cast out—His Holy Spirit will help you to do it—cast out avarice, passion, pride—cast out the world, the flesh, and the devil—cast out self—cast out everything. Let Him come in and fill the soul, and make it His temple and His home. Then at length will your soul keep Christmas; then at length will your soul have joy and rest. Make room for Him."

I have set down, with some approach to accuracy, certain portions of the young preacher's discourse. His voice, his manner I cannot set down; and, losing them, his words, I fear, have lost nearly every thing that made them so singularly impressive. For, after all, in a sermon or any other kind of address in which the appeal is rather to the heart than to the understanding, it is the man himself, far more than his words, that sways the audience. The speeches that read the best are often the most weariful to listen to. The preachers who have moved vast audiences

most deeply have been, not infrequently, the despair or the contempt of reporters. It is not more impossible to make attar of roses from a maiden's blushes than to take down in black and white the greatness of a great sermon. This sermon is, perhaps, almost commonplace to read; it was thrilling to hear. Still, since it has—as you will see by-and-by—a good deal to do with our story, I was bound to do my best to give you some idea of it.

"Beautiful sermon," said Mr. Arnold to his wife, as they were walking home; "very striking sermon, indeed. He's a certain Mr. Smith, the verger tells me, and he's going out to South Africa as a missionary. I hope the climate isn't very bad. He looked delicate—consumptive, I thought. Well, little woman," turning to Gladys, "what did you think of it?"

"I'm afraid she wasn't listening," Mrs. Arnold said. "I looked at her two or three times, trying to get her to attend. I suppose her cards were too much for her."

"Oh, dear, dear! that's very bad—very bad indeed. We must keep the cards till after church another time, mustn't we, Gladys?"

Gladys made no defence of her conduct, though, like most other young ladies of ten and a-half, she was generally fertile enough in explanations and excuses. She never told her father how she had been listening during the latter half of the sermon. She looked down, and said nothing. Somehow she felt as though she could not speak about that sermon at all.



CHAPTER III.

IF HE SHOULD COME TO-DAY.

THE Christmas dinner—what am I to say about it? I take it rather hard that I have to say anything. In the last story that I wrote I was compelled to be eloquent on the subject of plum-pudding, and now here again I cannot escape without at least a passing reference not only to plum-pudding, but also to mince-pies. Now the case stands so with me. I have two besetting weaknesses. The first is plum-pudding, and the second is mince-pies. When mince-pies are on the table alone I sometimes think that they are the strongest weakness, but when the two are there side by side, I feel that it is otherwise. Mince-pies are near and dear, but plum-pudding is nearest and dearest.

Now hear a pathetic tale. I may eat neither one nor the other—neither plum-pudding hot, plum-pudding cold, plum-pudding in the pot nine days old, nor mince-pies round or oval, covered or open, plain or rich. I have to

sit by and see others (less worthy, I cannot help but feel,) win happy month after happy month. It is not, however, the future, but the present bliss that I envy them. I have to sit by and see them take a second large slice of pudding, blazing and beautiful. have to help the pudding myself, and then send my own plate for a piece of cornflour mould, cold as zero, and insipid as a boiled stocking. Plum-pudding and mincepies don't agree with me, the doctor says. I don't agree with him. Not only do I have to do all that I have described, but I have even to write, in a cheerful Christmas vein, about other people—greedy boys and girls in particular—turning from pudding to pie, and then going back to pudding. It is hard, isn't it?

Well, let me get over it this time as quickly as possible.

Gladys was so very silent and pre-occupied during the brief interval between church and dinner that Mrs. Arnold began to feel a little uneasy about her, and even suggested to her husband that perhaps a basin of mutton-broth might be more appropriate diet for her than the Christmas luxuries. But Mr. Arnold

would not hear of his little woman being put on slops on that day of all the year.

"Nonsense, there's nothing the matter with her," he said. "She's only got a little chill, with sitting still in church. Come here, little woman, and warm your toes at the fire."

Gladys went to her father, and he took her on his knee, and made her tell him about her cards—the whole number of which, in spite of her depression, she had now found time to inspect. She had received only one robin, but this deficiency was more than made up by the sweetest emerald grasshopper, speeding, as the fairy queen's messenger, upon a moth's crimson back, and sounding his bugle as he flitted across the moon. There were several other charming fancies over whose graces I have not time to linger. Gladys brightened up considerably under her father's interest and kindness, and when, a few minutes afterwards, Dawson, the butler (and man-of-all-work), announced that dinner was served, she declared that she had a very excellent appetite. She proved her words, too, omitting no compliment of the season to the turkey and the sausages, the plum-pudding, wreathed in ghostly blue flame, the custard, and the mince-pies. (There, that's done.) Then came dessert, with oranges and almonds, and biscuits and candied fruits, to which Gladys made herself generally agreeable. Then her father made her drink a glass of port—up to the cutting—to their next happy Christmas party. After which, Mr. Arnold lit his cigar, and Gladys retired to her own purlieus.

"There, you see," said Mr. Arnold to his wife, as his little woman left the room, "she's not ill—nothing wrong with her at all."

"No, nothing wrong to-day, Frank, certainly. I only hope"—Mrs. Arnold glanced at the shells and peel displayed upon Gladys's plate—"there may be nothing wrong with her to-morrow."

Gladys's room was a very pleasant and comfortable apartment. The front window, indeed, looked down upon the street, which was dark and narrow; but from a small side window she caught a glimpse not only of their own modest garden, with its neat little lawn, and its few old fruit trees, and its lattice summer-house, but also, at a distance of fifty yards, of the shallow river Eden, crawling

slowly and circuitously along, and spanned, within the range of her vision, by three bridges. The more important of these bridges -connecting, as it did, the upper town with what was called the waterside—was a solid and not unpicturesque stone erection of a. respectable, if not a venerable, antiquity. Here all the day long might be seen little knots of idlers leaning on its parapet, and staring into the river; here somebody was always fishing-whether he was one boy or a succession of boys, Gladys never could determine. All the errand-boys in the town found time to rest their baskets on the parapet and watch for ten minutes that eternal float. The doctors' boys were among the most constant and patient sympathisers with the boy that was fishing. Gladys had had to wait half-anhour for her own cough-mixture while Dr. Ireland's mercury—a very diminutive one was hanging over the parapet at the risk of his neck and bottles. The further bank of the river—much more rural than the nearer one was rather a favourite lounge of the militiamen when they were up, and of nursemaids and others for whom scarlet coats have attrac-

tions; there were always life and colour along that bank. But it was not all play with the river, nor all amusement or idleness along its banks. On the nearer side, though not within Gladys's ken, stood elbowing one another, the three or four manufactories which divided among them the staple trade of the town. their neighbourhood it was the river's inodorous task to damp innumerable coils of varn; in their neighbourhood-along the bank-stood enormous frames on which were strained the great lengths of bright-coloured fabric into which the varn was fashioned. Here there was very little stir, but there was a good deal of business. Beyond the river undulated rich green fields; and, crowning their highest point, and conspicuous from all quarters of the town, rose the gray ruins of the castle. Altogether Gladys's view from her side-window was animated and picturesque. No wonder that, while she was studying her Pinnock, or sewing on a flounce to her doll's new costume, Gladys loved to have her chair drawn up to that little window, and to refresh herself with occasional glances over river, and bridge, and bank, and pasture, and ruin.

The room was a very large one. Some of its furniture seemed to suggest that it was a sitting-room, while some clearly stamped it as a bedroom. Indeed it was both. Here Gladys passed her short nights, which were marked by only two conscious processes—shutting her eyes at half-past eight, and opening them at half-past seven. Here, too, she spent those few half-hours of her day which were not passed in her mother's society. Gladys was an only child; and though, I am happy to say, she was not a spoiled child, yet she alone naturally absorbed all those attentions and favours which in some households have to be divided among half-a-dozen, or a dozen claimants. Hence she was the regular companion of her mother's walks and drives, of her shopping expeditions, and, not seldom, of her visits to the poor of her district. Often Mrs. Arnold would read aloud to Gladys such passages as she could understand of the last book from the library, whether it were History, Fiction, Poetry, or Travel. Under such influences Gladys was naturally growing up a rather thoughtful girl. Happily she was not "precocious." She was not at ten-and-a-half a

little old woman; but in intelligence and in attainment she might fairly have passed for twelve. Her body, too, thanks to a good long walk every day, to a cold bath all the year round, to occasional performances with a miniature pair of dumb-bells, and to the excellent appetite that these things produced—her body had kept pace with her mind. Many girls of twelve were under Gladys's height and strength. Excepting that she attended the College for one or two lessons a week in music and drawing, she was being educated by her mother—a most painstaking and sympathetic teacher. One thing more about Gladys, and after that she must be left to her own delineation,—she was lovely. Oh, such a sweet little face as she had—such big gray eyes, that had in them all the shifting lights and shadows of a mountain stream—sometimes gray, and sometimes almost black! Such bonny brown hair, which seemed to have the knack of sucking up all the stray sunbeams such bonny brown hair! and such floods of it! And such a complexion, too! Roses and Devonshire cream—that's what you would say it was made of. One more sweetness, and the

sweetest of all—she never dreamed that she was the least bit pretty. The only time that she spent before the glass was that quarter-of-an-hour, twice a day, during which she reluctantly submitted to the brushing and combing of her nurse, good Mrs. Heslop; with those occasional visits which her mother bade her pay, to see how crooked her bow was, or what a black patch she had on her nose.

Gladys's room was that chamber, existing in most houses, to which furniture, not good enough for the reception-rooms, and not bad enough for the lumber-room, was banished. Here sofas which had seen better days, chairs which had met with accidents, and nick-nacks which had gone out of fashion, passed the autumn of their existence in shabby-genteel retirement. In lying down, Gladys could choose between the attractions of three couches. all a little bristly, all afflicted with bald patches in their horse-hair, and all a little deranged internally. She could sit down on any one of nine chairs—if she did not mind the risk of going through. She could play her scales on a very handsome piano, whose only defect was having lost its voice. She had

quite a picture gallery, too. It was mainly composed of portraits. They represented generations when gentlemen seemed, for the most part, to squint, and when ladies' waists were very capricious, since they alternated between the places where their shoulders and their knees are now; but still it was very nice to have a gallery at all in one's bedroom. On the whole Gladys was very proud of her chamber, and it was the admiration of all the girls who came to have tea with her, and whom she withdrew thither to talk dolls with fitting secrecy and solemnity. Clever and thoughtful as her mother was, Gladys could not help feeling that her views about dolls were very crude and unsatisfactory.

There was a bright fire burning this afternoon; Gladys stood before it for some minutes with her hands crossed upon the mantelpiece, and her forehead resting on her hands. Now that the excitement of the Christmas dinner had passed away, her thoughts began to dwell again upon the sermon of the morning. "If He came again to-day!" There was a strange fascination for her in that thought. She had been accustomed all her life to the idea of a

second coming of the Saviour, but that was a coming in an awful and unknown future, not as the Son of Man, but as the Judge of man—a coming in power and great glory—with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God. That coming was vaguely familiar to her mind, but this coming bore no resemblance to that. The idea was wholly new to her. Yet it seemed almost natural that He who, two thousand years ago, had lived and died upon the earth as a man, should visit it again as a man.

"Think how He must have loved the world," reasoned Gladys, speaking aloud in the intensity of her feeling; "think how He must have loved it, to come down from Heaven, and be a baby, and a boy, and a grown-up man, and always poor, and often with nowhere to sleep at night, and all that He might make people good, like Him! And if He loved it like that, doesn't it seem strange that after He had once gone back to Heaven again, He should always keep there up above the clouds, and never come down to see how the world was going on? Wouldn't He want to see if it was growing any better, and if it

was sorry for having killed Him? Of course," she added, recollecting, "He can see every--thing where He is, even our hearts, else He wouldn't be able to judge us all at the Last Day. But then that doesn't seem quite the same thing as if He came down to earth now and then, and walked about the streets, and peeped in at the windows, and saw what people were doing inside their houses. would like to hear little boys and girls say their prayers, and He would like to hear what the clergyman said about Him in the sermon; and, oh! He would like to see the Christmas Cards, with all the nice hymns and verses about Him! I can't help thinking," said Gladys, quitting her position at the chimney-piece, and beginning to pace slowly up and down, "I can't help thinking that He must come back sometimes. Oh, I am sure he must. When an Angel is going to start off, and do something kind and nice to some poor old person, or some little baby, I know He says to him. 'I will go and do it instead.' And Christmas Day of course, is the very day of all others which He would choose. He would like to keep His birthday on the earth sometimes. He

would like to hear the children sing 'Peace on earth, good will towards men,' as the Angels did when He was a little Baby in themanger."

Her head was getting a little tired now. It was not often that Gladys thought connectedly for some minutes together, as she had done now. She lay down on the sofa next the fire, propping her head upon her clasped hands. "I wonder if I should be afraid, if I saw Him. Perhaps He has been knocking at our door, and nobody has ever been to let Him in! "Oh!" (half sitting up with the terrible thought) "I do hope He hasn't been turned away! Oh no," she said to herself a moment after, lying back again, reassured; "Mamma would have known His knock."

"No, I don't think I should be afraid. Of course I'm often very naughty. I forgot to feed my rabbit once, and it died. But He would know I did not mean to. He would know how I cried, when I found it lying quite cold, and how I buried it in the sunniest place in the whole garden, and how I never would have another afterwards. And He would know how hard it is to be always good. He was a

child Himself once. Of course He was never disobedient or troublesome; but still He understands all about boys and girls. No, I don't think I should be afraid."

Gladys's thoughts were getting a little less distinct now. She curled herself up on the sofa, vaguely contenting herself with the thought of Jesus as a child of her own age.

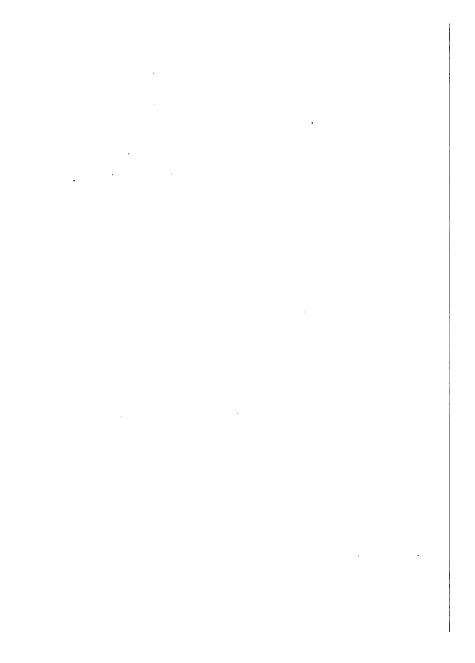


CHAPTER IV.

JESUS COMES TO GLADYS.

GLADYS could not tell how long she had been lying down-but it must have been some considerable time, for the first shadows of the early winter evening were beginning to darken the room—when she became aware of a presence beside her couch. She had not heard the door open, nor the sound of any footfall, but she gradually realized that someone was there, bending over her. For some seconds after perceiving this, she lay without speaking or looking up. There was a strange happiness in lying thus, for she knew Who it was who stood beside her. It was Jesus. He had come. in answer to her thoughts, in the dim Christmas twilight. She was perfectly assured that it was He. Whence the assurance came, she knew not: but there it was in her heart. There was such a blessed sense of perfect rest, in His presence at her side—it so completely satisfied her whole being—that even wonder

See page 36.



and curiosity were excluded. She kept her eyes closed, and lay perfectly motionless, drinking in His presence as a flower drinks in the sunshine.

At length He spoke. He merely pronounced her name, but oh! what full music His voice gave to the familiar word!

"Gladys!"

She looked up, and her eyes met His. It was a boy who bent over her-a boy numbering in reality, perhaps, some twelve or thirteen summers, but of growth and manliness such as English boys do not attain till some years later. At twelve years old, a Jewish boy becomes a Son of the Law, and enters into the privileges of manhood; and He upon whom Gladys looked was a Jewish boy. His whole appearance—the dark hair, crisply curling almost as low as the shoulders, the clear brown skin, the contour of the featurestold her this. His eyes were large and dark, and full of mingled dignity and tenderness. Gladys had seen many beautiful eyes,—many eyes that expressed eloquently every emotion of the soul, but no eyes like these; because no eyes that she had seen were the interpreters of

a soul like this. They were very soft and tender now, as they met her gaze; but she felt how terrible they could be. They could melt with pity, but they could also flash with holy indignation. They could bless a saddened heart, they could invite a little child; but they could wither a deceit and cow a cruelty.

His dress was simple, and even mean. Round His head He wore a turban. A close-fitting woollen garment descended to His ankles. Its sleeves were long and loose, and it was secured round the waist by a girdle. His shoulders were wrapped in a kind of plaid. His feet were protected by rough sandals. A few grains of sawdust adhering to his dress suggested that He followed the trade of a carpenter.

"Are you indeed come, my Lord?" said Gladys, raising herself, and bowing before Him, not in fear, but in adoration. "I have often thought how happy those women were who ministered to You, and those little children whom You took up in Your arms and blessed. And now You let me look upon You. O, my Lord, I was not worthy of this, but it makes my heart very glad."

"Call me Jesus," He said. "That is the Name I bore through My childhood. That is the Name I heard from My mother's lips. That is the Name the angel gave Me at My Father's bidding. That is the Name that was written above My Cross. That is the Name which expresses all My work for man,—Jesus—Saviour. There is no name so sweet. Call Me Jesus."

"May I ask You one thing, blessed Jesus?" Gladys said.

"Ask Me what you will. Have no fear, little one," He said, with a grave, beautiful smile.

"Why did You come to me? I am not good—even I know that. I am very, very far from good. And to You—Oh! how wicked I must seem to You! Why did You come to me?

"Because you wanted Me to come, Gladys. I come to every one that wants Me, but not, as I come now, in bodily shape. My Holy Spirit comes. I have come to you many times, Gladys. When you rose from your knees, refreshed and strengthened, ready to bear your little burdens, and fight your childish battles, it was because I had been with you. When

you closed your eyes at night, feeling that your rest would be safe and blessed, it was because My peace was settling on your heart. And, oh! be sure that at your household prayers, night and morning, I am present—there, and wheresoever two or three are gathered together in My Name."

"I will think of these things, blessed Jesus. It will be very sweet to know that You are near me when I pray."

"Nearest in your prayers, little one, but always near. Praying fills only a small fragment of your life, and I am with you through all your life. Think of Me, Gladys, in your lessons and your play, and you will find Me close at hand."

"But to-day You come as a boy—as You used to be when You went up to Jerusalem with Joseph and Mary, and stayed behind to talk with the Doctors in the Temple, because you wanted to learn all that You could, so that You could begin Your Father's business. You come to me to-day, blessed Jesus, as a boy not much older than me. Why is this?

"Every Christmas Day I come to tread the dear earth in which I lived and died. Sometimes I come as a man, to plead with men and women, and to make them happy, if they will let Me. Sometimes I come as a child, that I may touch the hearts of little children, of boys and girls. For, indeed, I love My little ones. My lambs are as precious as my sheep. I want to be the children's Saviour, as well as the Saviour of strong men and matrons, and white-headed and weary old folk. I want the boys and girls to play heartily, yet kindly and purely, as I used to play in the street of Nazareth. I want them to pray earnestly and devoutly, as I used to do at My mother's knee. I want them in the midst of their work or play to look up to My Father in Heaven, and ask for strength and guidance, as I used to do. I want them to love and obey their dear parents, as I was subject to Joseph and My mother. I want them to think of Me, not only as their King in Heaven, but also as One always at their side, once a child like themselves, and still knowing their wants, and sharing in their joys and sorrows. And so I come, a stripling lad, as I was when I worked in Joseph's shop, and played in the town after My day's work was done." "Do you come to

all the boys and girls?" "Not to all—only to those who want Me. The disobedient and ungentle would not know Me; and, even if they did know Me, they would be afraid to have Me near. I go to all those that have prayed on Christmas morning." "I thought everybody said their prayers," said Gladys. "Many say their prayers; only a few pray. But I go, too, to many a poor little soul that has never learnt to say a prayer at all, but whose every action, none the less, prays to Me." "Prays without knowing a prayer!" said Gladys, "how can that be?" "Whenever a child or a man tries to be good, so far as he knows what goodness is—even though he has never heard My Name, then his whole life prays to Me, and I answer his prayer." "How glad I am that I prayed this morning!" "Always pray. Heaven was opened when I prayed, and Heaven is always open to every praying soul. And now, little one, come with Me, and you shall see to whom I go this Christmas night." The church bells were just beginning to ring, as Gladys and her companion emerged upon the darkened streets.

CHAPTER V.

EDENDALE COLLEGE:

Principal-R. RITSON, Esq., 1st B.A., University of London.

WHEN I spoke of the College a little while ago, I ought to have explained in what sense that ambitious term was used. It must not be understood for one moment that Edendale rejoices in an educational corporation, administering endowments, and electing to scholarships and exhibitions. That, I suppose, is what a College ought to be, and indeed must be, if the term be accurately used. But, in the case of Edendale, and of very many other pompous little towns, I fear, "College" is only the genteel for "School"—not a High School, or a Grammar School, which are schools still-but a Private School. As a draper's shop in these latter days becomes an Emporium, and a grocer's shop an Establishment, so a small private school becomes a Seminary, or an Academy, and a large private school becomes a College. It is a pleasing

term—"College;" parents do not grumble at the number of towels required with each pupil, when they remember that Augustus John is going to College. Now mind, I have not a word to say against the College at Edendale. I have the authority of a parent of present pupils for saying that the curriculum is comprehensive, the diet unlimited, the tone of the young gentlemen all that could be desired. Nevertheless the College would, in my nostrils, smell sweeter under the name of School. The College is a large and massive building, affording accommodation for about eighty boarders; and its accommodation is usually strained to the utmost, since its reputation extends over two or three counties. Of day-pupils there are some twenty or thirty, and girls are allowed to avail themselves of the lessons of some of the visiting masters. College is a very popular institution among the Edendale tradesmen. Eighty boys represent yearly a highly respectable aggregate of beef, mutton, flour, suet, sugar, milk, and tea. Tarts, too; eighty boys mean annually in tarts three naughts and a big unit before them. One cannot but respect facts like these. The

next-door neighbours of the College may complain of noise and impudence and broken panes; but Edendale butchers and grocers hear the complaint with scant patience, and take off their hats to the ushers with much solemnity, as the eighty young gentlemen, all in College caps, with yellow tassels, and varying in standing from knickerbockered brats to young men with moustaches visible in a good light, file through the streets. The school buildings stand in the very core of the town—a situation open to some objection. This circumstance, however, renders those lessons to which the College admits outsiders more generally acceptable than would otherwise have been the case. Gladys, as I have said, was one of those damsels of the town who, let us hope, profited by the instruction of masters on the College staff. By this time she had begun to regard almost familiarly the great brown building, with its long regular rows of windows, that somehow suggested young gentlemen walking two and two, its spiky iron railings, the gravel space which those railings guarded, its steps, whose awful cleanness at first made her think of ascending

them without her boots and stockings. She rat-tatted the great brass knocker almost jauntily now, and tripped into the class-room as though it were quite an ordinary place. She was on nodding terms with two or three of the young gentlemen, and knew a much larger number by sight or by name. was one youth, Master Morton, who might be a year older than herself, though he was not so tall by a couple of inches, whom she regarded as a half-declared admirer. times, without any necessity, he had proffered his india-rubber, and once, when her seat had been next to his, she had discovered, later in the day, a stick of chocolate in her pocket. She suspected him—without much evidence. it is true—of the squirrel. She had not encouraged Master Morton, but she felt no repugnance to his attentions.

Four or five days ago it had been Speech Day at the College; Gladys had been there with her mother, and had listened with much admiration to the recitations in Greek and Latin, in French and German. One or two of the young gentlemen had even condescended to give selections from Tennyson and Browning. But these performances, being generally understood, had been somewhat coldly received. Much to Gladys's disappointment, Master Morton had not appeared on the platform at all, nor had he figured in the distribution of prizes. She had only once caught sight of his curly black head, very far back among the knickerbockers.

It was vacation now at the College. In about three weeks, the road to the station would wax merry with flys and round faces, and the young gentlemen would re-assemble for the prosecution of their agreeable studies. Meanwhile, the great brown building looked gloomy and deserted enough. The whistle of the butcher's boy, as he clattered down the courtyard, carrying the one small leg of mutton which was all that was wanted now. awake dismal echoes. Gladys shuddered as she passed the College in these days. No sound from it reached the street, but she knew that within duster and broom and bucket were holding their terminal carnival. She knew that the forms were damp, and the desks standing with their legs in the air. At night she fancied the ghosts of impositions and detentions must dance in the chilly gloom. Think of sleeping in that deserted place! Ugh! She almost pitied the Principal, Mr. Ritson (1st B.A. of London), stonily as his spectacles shone. She quite pitied the civil young housemaid, who occasionally opened the door in the absence, on business or pleasure, of the impudent boy in buttons, whose proper function it was to attend to the bell. That boy she could not manage to pity at all—he was all buttons, and bear's grease, and brass. On Christmas afternoon, however, -whatever the case might be at nightneither the boy, nor the maid, nor the master stood in the smallest need of Gladys's compassion. This I hope to prove beyond all doubt in the following chapter.



CHAPTER VI.

A COMFORTABLE SITTING-ROOM, A FESTIVE KITCHEN, AND A VERY DISMAL SCHOOL-ROOM.

THE Christmas night had closed in when Gladys's Divine Visitant led her through the streets of Edendale. A bitterer night could hardly be imagined. There had been rain in the morning; but early in the afternoon the frost had set in. Already the panes were embossed, and the steps and pavement were treacherous with ice. A wind that seemed to be hewn out of an ice-floe cut its way straight down the long main street. The invitation of the church bells was meeting with a chilling response. The chimes of the Parish Church rolled out their mellow music. St. Lazarus' poor little bell clanked with feeble energy. But the streets were almost deserted, and of the thinly-scattered passengers, who, muffled and shawled and coated, dared to brave the tyranny of the weather, it was evident that only one here and there was braving it for the

sake of hearing more of the good news of Christmas Day. They must have been almost literally two or three who were gathered together in Christ's Name on His Birthday evening. Of those who disputed the streets with Gladys and her Companion far more had the aspect of revellers than had that of worshippers. But, few as were the passengers, and engrossed as were those few with fighting the wind and hurrying to shelter, it yet struck Gladys as very remarkable that thus far the appearance of her Companion had excited neither comment nor observation. It was not, perhaps, wonderful that, in the ill-lighted streets, His majestic beauty should pass unnoticed; but it surely was very strange that His garb had drawn upon Him no curious Never within her memory had glances. Gladys seen an Eastern dress in the streets of her native town. At mid-day such a dress would have drawn a crowd around the wearer. Even under these present circumstances it might naturally be expected to attract some attention. Yet not one single eye, she felt confident, had rested upon Him who walked at her side. At length she ventured to tell Him of her wonder.

"Blessed Jesus," she said, timidly, "may I ask you one thing?"

"Assuredly, My little one. Tell me first what is passing in your mind. You must not be afraid of Me."

"How is it that nobody has noticed You at all?"

"Do you remember what I said about My coming to those who wanted Me, and to those only?"

"I do, blessed Jesus. I think I shall never forget any word that You have said."

"As, My child, I come only to the longing heart, so I am visible only to the pure eye. I might pass through London's densest street, and not a soul dream of the Presence in their midst, if no vision there was purified from earthly mists. But, I thank my Father that, though longing hearts and pure eyes be few, yet longing hearts and pure eyes there are."

At this moment Gladys recognised, advancing slowly and painfully under the guidance of his little white dog, a blind old man, well known to her and to all Edendale folks. He was making his way homeward, probably, for his home was in a yard off the street along

which her Companion was then leading her. The blind man's progress, always difficult, was that night unusually so. Even to the seeing the glassy pavement was not without its perils. So slowly did the blind man's nervous steps, each one marked by the clank of his staff, follow each other along the kerb, that his little dog shivered piteously with the cold.

Gladys's compassion was touched. Instinctively she darted forward and placed in the poor man's trembling hand a long-treasured threepenny-bit,—all the money which her purse contained. In a moment she had regained her Companion's side.

"It was done unto Me, little one," He said. "Your bright new threepenny-bit is treasure in Heaven now."

A few yards further on, at a point where the street was lighted by a lamp on either side, the two little parties met. They were only one moment in passing one another, yet in that moment Gladys saw a wonderful and beautiful change come over the blind man's face.

Eyes are the very voices of the soul. It is hard for a blind face to express its emotions. Yet over this darkened countenance came a

holy light, a soft rapture, a blissful repose. So might Stephen have looked, as the last stone struck him down, and he fell asleep. So might Bartimæus have looked in his dreams on the night that followed the restoration of his sight.

The blind eyes had seen Jesus.

"I cannot now, as in the days of my flesh," the Master said to His little maid, "touch the blind eyes, and say, 'Receive thy sight;' yet faith, now as then, fails not of its blessing. My word, spoken to one that asked my help, is true for all—'As thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee.' This blind man has said to Me, 'Lord, that my soul might receive its sight;' and I have answered, 'Go thy way; thy faith hath made thee whole."

Gladys said nothing. She was laying up every word in her heart.

There was silence for a little while. At length Gladys found time to wonder how it was that she had not felt the cold at all. Everyone else who was abroad that night seemed to suffer from it terribly. She had not experienced the least discomfort. Was her exemption due to the Presence at her side?

While she was still thinking about this, they turned down Eastgate Street, and, a little later, the College came in view.

"That," said her Guide, "is the place where My first task lies."

"But, blessed Jesus," Gladys ventured to reply, "if you come to-day to be the Saviour of little children, and boys and girls, not grown-up people, why do you come here? The school is broken up, and all the boys are gone home."

"Not all, little one. There is one here still."

"Oh, poor boy! how sorry I am for him! Think of spending Christmas Day at school! and think of being the only boy in that great dormitory at night! Oh, poor, poor boy; it makes me shudder to think of him!"

"Soft little heart," said her Guide, laying His hand on her head, and looking at her with a smile of grave tenderness, "pray to My Father, Gladys, that you may keep that compassionate child's-heart as long as you live. But now, follow Me, little one, and I will take you to see that little lonely boy."

He took her hand, and led her down the courtyard.

Confident as she was in the protection of her Companion, Gladys could not restrain a little nervous shrinking at the idea of intruding on the school precincts at such an unusual hour. Her reverence, however, for Him who was leading her thither, prevented her from expressing her feelings. Perhaps her hand, unconsciously closed a little more tightly on the hand that held it,—perhaps she hung back a little as they ascended the broad stone steps—at any rate, her nervousness did not escape her Guide.

"Fear not, My child," He said; "none will chide you; none will speak to you, none, without My wish, will see you. Your body is under the spirit's control to-night; see!"

He led her up the steps. Before them, barring further progress, stood the great oak door; no change came over this—no visible marvel of any kind took place. Certainly the door did not open; no chain rattled, no bolt shot back, no key grated in the lock; yet, an instant later, Gladys stood beside Jesus within the hall.

He led her rapidly along certain passages which she did not remember to have traversed

before; and, after passing up a well-lit, but unfamiliar staircase, they issued upon a landing evidently situated in that part of the house appropriated to the head-master's use.

Sounds were now audible which Gladys had been little apt to associate with that mysterious and venerable place where the head master spent his hours of privacy. Laughter! Was it possible that head-masters or their friends ever lapsed so far from their severe decorum as to laugh? Surely it was hardly possible; yet this was laughter, and very hearty laughter, too. There was no mistaking the sound,—but from whom could it proceed? The master must be out, Gladys thought, and the servants must be taking advantage of his absence to give vent to a little of their pent-up merriment.

Facing the staircase was a door, from the direction of which the laughter seemed to come. Through this, as through the street-door, Gladys and her Guide passed.

The room was the head-master's study, and here, surrounded by two or three friends, the head-master sat. The room was luxuriously comfortable; soft, warm winter curtains shut out the bitter weather and the dismal street, and every sound from without; shaded lamps shed a subdued light; the elbow-chairs and couches seemed the embodiments of ease; the foot trod noiselessly on the Turkey carpet; a pictured screen before the door excluded the slightest draught from the staircase; the fire was what a fire ought to be—and hardly ever is —red to its very heart, smokeless, flameless, glowing.

Grouped around this fire sat the headmaster, Mrs. Ritson, and two gentlemen. On a side-table stood decanters and dessert; but dessert was over now, and the lady was pouring out tea, the fragrance of which filled the room.

In spite even of the assurance which she had received as to her invisibility, Gladys could not check a little tremor at standing uninvited in the august presence of the principal of the college. Very soon, however, it became evident to her that no intrusion had been perceived. Not an exclamation was uttered; not a head was turned. Tea was poured out and handed round; conversation flowed on; laughter was as loud and frequent as before.

Gathering confidence, Gladys surveyed the scene with interest. A schoolmaster, then, really was a human being. Of all the gentlemen, Mr. Ritson had the heartiest laugh. Despite his blue spectacles, his aspect was kindly and jovial. He looked the sort of man to take a little girl on his knee and tell her fairy-tales. Gladys determined on the spot that the next time he said to her "Good morning, Miss Arnold," she would look up and reply, "Good morning, Mr. Ritson," instead of dropping her eyes and saying nothing, as had hitherto been her custom.

No merrier little party were keeping Christmas that night, Gladys felt assured, than that of whose enjoyment she was an unseen witness. None the less, she could not help feeling that that and similar little parties had much better have accepted the invitation of the church bells, and have given at least an hour of their Christmas-night to public prayer and praise.

But now, at a signal from her Guide, Gladys followed Him from the room, as silently and invisibly as she had entered it.

Once again passages and steps were quickly traversed; and, a few moments later, Gladys

found herself a witness of another scene of mirth quite as hearty, though of a somewhat different character.

She was standing in the servants' hall. The staff of domestics, themselves forming a tolerably numerous assembly, had on this occasion enlarged their circle by the invitation of many friends. There was a pleasant air of holiday clothes and holiday temper about the whole gathering—an air which seemed to say "Holidays don't come often; let us make the most of this."

The walls and ceiling were gay with evergreens; a mighty log—a real yule-log—was roaring up the chimney. Certain fragrant wafts hinted, not obscurely, that Father Christmas had no intention of forfeiting his well-won reputation for bringing good cheer when he comes. Supper was still half-an-hour distant, but the interval seemed to be by no means an awkward half-hour. The conversation was incessant, the laughter frequent; very small jokes elicited very loud peals of mirth. Perhaps it was felt that, without the evidence of general applause, some of the sallies might have had a difficulty in sustaining their

character as jokes; that evidence, however, was never lacking,—the boy in buttons laughed at everything till the tears ran down his cheeks, and never asked himself why.

Among the merriest and noisiest of the party, Gladys, on her entrance, had recognized Mrs. Hayton, the cook, and that pleasant-featured young housemaid, who occasionally opened the door to visitors. While, however, standing at the Master's side, she surveyed the festive gathering, she fancied that the mirth of these two became a little more subdued. Their laughter was not quite so loud, and their faces lost something of their aspect of broad fun; some softer and deeper feeling seemed to be blending with their gaiety. At length they drew back a little from their companions, and conversed between themselves.

"I used to go to church on Christmas evening, when I was at home," said Mrs. Hayton.

"So did I," said the housemaid.

"There's no harm in enjoying yourself on Christmas-day," the cook went on, "but the enjoyment ought not to be just the same as what you have at a coming-of-age or a fair. Folks ought to remember Christ at Christmas time, and take care that their pleasure is of a sort that He would take pleasure in."

"Yes, holiday means holy day, I suppose. To do nothing but eat and drink and laugh and joke does seem a strange way of keeping a day holv."

"Esther," the cook whispered to her friend, "we'll try and see as the young folk's spirits don't carry them too far to-night; and if we should be here next Christmas-day, we'll get leave to go to church in the evening, won't we?"

"That we will, Mrs. Hayton. I wonder how it was that a kind of feeling-I don't know what to call it—a kind of feeling as though we'd like to do better—came over you and me just at the same time."

"I was just thinking to myself 'if Jesus was among us to-night, would He approve of our way of spending Christmas?' and then -I hardly like to tell you what a queer notion came into my head—really, I almost felt as though Jesus was present."

"How very strange! I never knew anything so strange! The very same thing happened to me."

At this point, Gladys, obeying a signal from the Master, glided from the room.

"How was it, blessed Jesus," she asked, as they ascended the staircase that led to the school-room, "how was it that those two women had some kind of feeling of your presence, and no one else had any?"

"Those two women, little one, and those two only, prayed this morning. Most of the others said their prayers, but these two prayed."

Jesus led the little maid into the schoolroom. It was a long and somewhat narrow
room, extending almost the entire length of
the house. To-night its further recesses were
invisible, as it was only lit by a solitary gasburner. Desks and forms were piled together
in strange confusion; in the dim light the
upturned legs of the latter seemed stretched
out like goblin limbs. The floor was still
damp from recent scouring, and over the
whole place there hung an aspect of homeless
disorder. If anything could have brightened
up the dismal place, Gladys thought, it would
have been a great blazing fire; though even
that sovereign charm against depression would

have its potency sorely taxed; but there was no fire. The room was warmed, or rather had the rough edge of the chill taken off it, by a stove. And so that poor lonely little boy—whoever he might be—could not even comfort his heart by spreading his hands to the genial embers, and picturing in them the faces he loved. He might have made a friend of the fire, poor fellow, Gladys thought.

But where was he? Hitherto forms and desks on the floor, and maps on the wall, seemed to be the sole occupants of this palace of gloom. At length, her eyes becoming more accustomed to the dim light, she discerned, at the upper extremity of the room, seated on a long form and stooping over a desk, a little forlorn figure. Unseen, she took up a position near the boy at her Companion's side.

In the pity which, on learning that a solitary boy was remaining at school during the vacation, her gentle heart had promptly bestowed on his forlorn condition, she had thought of him as a stranger to herself; she had never for a moment pictured him as being one of her few acquaintances among the pupils at the college. Had she done so, her compassion would have been even stronger than it was. But lo! the little solitary at whose side she stood, was no stranger; it was her friend and admirer, Master Morton.

Did Gladys take his hand between her own, and condole with him, and make much of him? Did she say, "Oh, Master Morton, I had no idea that you were left here, to spend your holidays all by yourself! If I had only known in time, I would have asked mamma to let you come to us, for Christmasday, at any rate; I am so very, very sorry for you, poor Master Morton!"

No, she did not say a word to him, good or bad. I cannot tell you how it was made known to her, but by some means or other it was made known to her clearly enough that her part in this scene was to be that of a silent spectator. Indeed, I think that, even if she had attempted to speak to any other than to Him Who had brought her thither, she would have found that her voice conveyed neither sound nor sense.

2002

CHAPTER VII.

WHO HELPED MASTER MORTON TO WRITE HIS LETTER HOME.

"OH dear, dear," said Master Morton, speaking to himself, "My poor arm does ache so! my fingers are so cramped! I don't know how it is I do get so covered with ink when I write--my nails are full of it! I think I must have put my thumb right into the inkpot while I was thinking,—I don't believe it will ever come white again; and it's on my wristbands and my collar, and I've rubbed ever such lots of it into my hair, in spelling the hard words; I think I must have got a blot into this left eye somehow. It is so difficult to write a letter! I thought I must have got ever so much done, and I'm two lines off the bottom of the page yet. Oh dear, dear, dear, and I had got such lots to say before I began to write, and now somehow it's all gone somewhere. I must rest a little bit, and uncramp my fingers and unwind my legs."

He laid down his pen, and rested his head on the desk, the picture of weariness and despair.

Peeping over his shoulder, Gladys read the still wet sheet. It was the fruit of a good hour's painful labour. It had three large black blots, and one or two of a lighter colour. Gladys knew how they came there well enough. This is how the letter ran—

"The College, Edendale, "Christmas Day.

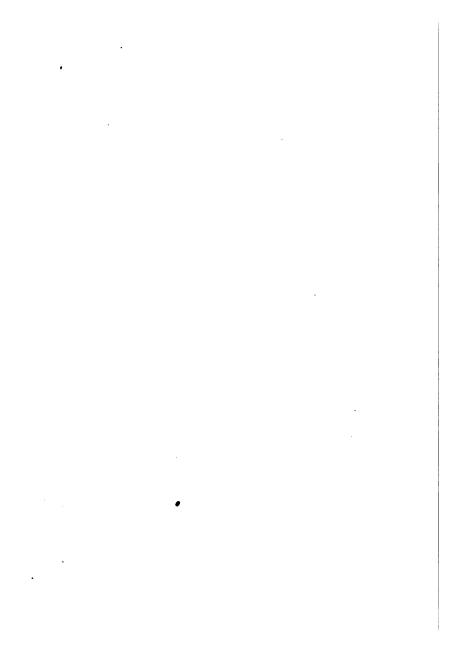
"My dear, dear Mamma.

"We broke up a week ago, and all the boys are gone home, and I am the only boy here, and it is very lonely, and I do so long to see you and Papa, and everybody. You must not mind these blots, dear Mamma, and you must not think me unmanly to cry. I would not cry, only it is Christmas Day, and I do think of you so much. It is very lonely in the dormetary, and the rats make such noises in the Wane Scott. Please excuse this blot. I look at the map of India very often, and I"——

If Gladys had been her ordinary self, another salt blot would have disfigured poor Master Morton's already much besmeared production.



See page 66.



She supposed, however, she could not cry now, for no tears fell.

After resting his aching limbs and brain for a few moments, poor Master Morton rose and walked across the room to where hung upon the wall a large map of India.

A sad little figure he was indeed. In passing his fingers through his hair in search of ideas, he had ruffled his dark locks till they stood on end like bristles. Tears and ink united had smeared his face most wofully. At his straightest and boldest he was a tiny boy, but in his present forlorn condition, he seemed to have shrunk almost to nothing. Poor, poor Master Morton!

The little boy, standing on tiptoe, plodded over the map with his forefinger, until at length it pointed to Madras.

"Oh, dear, dear Madras," he said, "how I do love you!" and stretching his small body to its very utmost limits, he pressed his mouth against the map and imprinted a loving kiss upon it. The salute was, of course, intended for Madras, but Master Morton failed to extend himself quite so far north as that, and Palk Strait received the smack.

The little boy stood gazing at the map, with a look of longing love in his eyes, for two or three minutes. Then he drew a long sigh, shook his head, and, walking back to his old position at the desk, took a dip of ink, twined his legs round the form, rounded his back, got his nose well down upon the paper, and resumed his task.

"Where was I?" he muttered, "Oh, here. 'I look at the map of India very often, and I ---," slowly the pen scratched the completion of the sentence-"always kiss Madras. I have just kissed it now. I don't know how it is, dear Mamma, but somehow I have got much happier since I kissed Madras. I felt very lonely when I began my letter, but I do not feel so lonely now; I have been thinking about Jesus, who was once a boy like me, and who wanted to learn so much that he stayed behind in the temple and was found both hearing and asking the doctors questions. But he went home with Mary and Joseff, and was subject unto them. And I have been thinking that Jesus is with me, and will help me to be good and not to fret, and to do bills of Parsels. I feel as though Jesus was near me now; I know that he is always near, but somehow to-night I feel as though he was standing close beside me, and, dear Mamma, it does make me so happy; I shall not mind the rats in the dormetary to-night. My arm aches with writing so much, so now I must conclude. With best love to Papa and Emily, and most of all to you,

I remain, dear Mamma, Your affecte Son, GEORGE F. MORTON."

The little boy folded the letter, addressed the envelope, and then placed the precious missive safely in his desk.

He then opened a little New Testament and, resting his elbows on the desk, began reading, guiding his way with his forefinger. His face had grown wonderfully bright and happy now. Glancing over his shoulder, Gladys saw that the passage which he was reading was the story of how the angels first preached the gospel to the shepherds of Bethlehem.

As she glanced, Gladys felt a hand rest protectingly on her shoulder. She nestled to her Master's side; and so Jesus and the little girl and boy—the Good Shepherd and two of his

lambs; the Saviour and two of his cherished little ones—read together the story of the first Christmas:—

- "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.
- "And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.
- "And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.
- "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.
- "And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.
- "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,
- "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

The little boy closed the book, and replaced it in his desk.

He had hardly done so, when the door was

opened, and the bright-faced young housemaid came tripping into the room.

"Where are you, Master Morton?" she asked; "not gone to bed yet, surely?"

"No, here I am, Esther. Come in and talk to me a little bit, there's a good girl. I always like talking to you, Esther."

"That's the very thing I'm come to do," she replied, advancing to Master Morton's end of the room. "But I'm not only come to talk—look what I've brought you."

Fragrant wafts had preceded the housemaid, and now she set down on the desk beside the boy a little round tray. Gazing upon this in wondering admiration, Master Morton beheld a tumbler containing some steaming compound, and a hot mince-pie of the plumpest symmetry.

"They are not for me," he said. "No, they can't be for me. It's too bad of you, Esther, to let a fellow catch a whiff of them, and then whisk them off to the head-master."

"They are for you, I tell you, you little silly. Come, now, don't you say another word, but just you gobble up this mince-pie while it's hot."

Still half-believing that the tray was a beautiful phantom, and Esther a plump and mischievous fairy, the boy reached forth his hand, and grasped the mince-pie. It felt substantial, anyhow. He pouted his lips, and took a little boy's big bite. Crunch went the paste; squab went the mince-meat. It was a real corporeal pie—no doubt of that.

"Good?" inquired Esther.

"Ain't it just," replied Master Morton, his left cheek bulging prodigiously.

"Now you have a pull at this," said the housemaid, presenting the tumbler. "You like elderberry wine, don't you?"

"Try me."

He took a long pull, and a strong pull.

"That warms you, I know, Master Morton."

"Down to my toes, Esther—right down to my toes."

The pie melted away in a few delicious crunches; the wine and water, by reason of its exceeding hotness, lasted rather longer. In about three minutes, however, the tumbler was drained, and the last lingering specks of nutmeg were licked up, and, with a comfortable sigh, Master Morton resigned to

Esther the casket that had contained that jewel of a cordial.

- "I'm afraid you've had rather a dull Christmas Day," the housemaid said.
- "Yes, it was dull, jolly dull, till a little time ago, but I've enjoyed the last hour or two awfully."
- "Why, what have you been doing? You can't play Blind Man's Buff, or Hunt-the-Slipper, or Post, or anything of that sort by yourself very well."
- "I've been writing home, and —I say, Esther, you won't chaff a fellow if I tell you, will you?"
- "To be sure, I won't; you can trust me, Master Morton."
- "Well, then, I've been reading about the shepherds,—'While shepherds watched their flocks by night,' you know."
- "Have you now? Well, I'm glad to hear that. Young gentlemen are not generally very fond of reading their Bibles, I'm afraid."
- "While I was reading, Esther—don't laugh, there's a good girl—upon my word, I could almost have believed that Jesus was standing by me."

"Really, really, now! how very strange to hear you say that! why, the very same thing has happened to me and cook. There's something I can't make out about this Christmas Day."

"When I got up this morning, I was thinking Mamma was with me last Christmas Day, and she heard me say my prayers. And so I thought about my prayers, you know, when I said them this morning, and I asked to be made good, and— D'ye think it could be that that made me think Jesus was so near to-night, Esther?"

"Indeed, I think it was that, my dear. I put my heart into my prayers, too, this morning. Master Morton, we'll always try and think about our prayers, won't we?"

"Yes, we will, and then, perhaps, we shall always feel that Jesus is near us."

"Well, I must say good-night now, or they'll think I'm lost."

The pretty housemaid took up the tray, and, smiling, turned to retire.

"Stop a moment, Esther," cried the little boarder. "I say, Esther, would you mind would it hurt your feelings, if I was to kiss you?" "Not a bit, Master Morton."

The girl stooped; the little boy balanced himself upon his toes, and, throwing his arms round Esther's neck, imprinted on her rosy cheeks several very hearty kisses.

"Oh, come, come, that'll do. You've very near kissed all my breath away. Good night, my dear, and God bless you."

"I'll ask Mamma," thought Gladys, as once again she threaded the streets at her Master's side, "I'll ask Mamma to let Master Morton spend the rest of his holidays with us."

"Done by one of My little ones to one of My little ones," said Jesus, answering her thought, "and assuredly done unto Me."



CHAPTER VIII.

WHAT CAME OF ELLA'S CHRISTMAS-MORNING PRAYERS.

Jesus led the little maid rapidly through two or three streets. After a few minutes' walking the town was left behind, and that suburb reached in which most of the best houses were situated. Passing on yet a little further, Gladys came in sight of a house which she knew very well. It was a handsome villa, standing back thirty or forty yards from the road, with the trimmest of lawns and the crispest of gravel, with greenhouses and graperies, with stables and piggeries, and with a very youthful plantation skirting one side of the house, but hardly justifying as yet the name of "The Beeches." It was here that Gladys's Ella Lancaster lived, who was greatest friend. Here, conveyed in state in Mrs. Lancaster's pony-carriage, Gladys had spent many a long day, inventing startling novelties in doll-fashions, and (in imagination, of course) entertaining at tea, served in Ella's doll'scups, many distinguished persons-Royalty not infrequently included. Here, in weather more favourable for open-air amusement, Gladys had received her first lessons in lawntennis from Ella's brother, Leonard, a boy two years older than his sister, and one year older than Gladys. Leonard was a pupil at the college, and a class-mate of Master Morton's -of whom, by the way, as being only in knickerbockers, he spoke with some contempt. Master Morton, too, had only threepence a week, while Leonard had a shilling, besides frequent splendid windfalls. For Ella's brother, Gladys felt a good deal of veneration, as a young gentleman with not only a very liberal allowance of pocket-money, but with also a very considerable allowance of brains and a good deal of skill at all kinds of manly sports. He was a capital hand at lawn-tennis, swam well, rode his own pony, and was one of the best of the college juniors in the cricket-field. He had a fly-rod and a fishing-basket, a canehandled bat, a stamp-album, and a splendid box of water-colours. His rocking-horse, his bricks, his puzzles, his sumptuous Noah's ark

—possessions lightly regarded by himself, as a fellow in the college third eleven—excited Gladys's envious admiration. She regarded Leonard as an acquaintance of no little distinction, but she did not altogether like him. He bullied Ella a good deal, she thought, and was somewhat patronising in his behaviour towards herself. Ella, though just a little bit spoiled, was a dear little girl; and, on the whole, Gladys enjoyed her visits to The Beeches very much indeed.

She had hardly had time to wonder if it was to that familiar house that the next visit was to be paid, when her Companion removed all doubt on the subject by saying,—

"We are going to see friends of yours now, little one."

Mr. Lancaster was a great lover of dogs, and kept an unusually large staff of canine retainers. There were two or three little pets of his, spaniels and terriers, with whom Gladys was on terms of much cordiality. But there was one great fellow—a mastiff of the noblest lineage—that always caused the little maid some tremors when she went alone to call upon her friend. The stable-yard, where was the

dog's kennel, lay behind the house some few yards to the left. The utmost stretch of his chain would not reach to within twenty yards of the nearest point of the drive, but Gladys always ran nervously past the place where his kennel came in sight. She could not forget how one day, when, unmindful of his presence, she was sauntering leisurely up the drive, she heard a short, sudden growl, of tiger-like ferocity, and saw the great beast, with flashing yellow eyes, spring from his kennel, and rush towards her, till he was pulled up short by his chain; and how then he hung, showing his white teeth, and struggling to get at her. She had been again and again assured by Mr. Lancaster that the dog could not possibly break his chain, and that there was no cause for alarm in passing him. She had even, under Mr. Lancaster's protection, gone up to Achilles—that was the mastiff's name—and patted his great head. But, alone, she never passed up the drive without a quickened step and averted eyes.

To night she was so absorbed in thoughts about what she had already seen and conjectures about what she was yet to see, that the very existence of the mastiff had escaped her memory. Even if she had remembered him, she would have placed her hand, with a trustful smile, in the hand of Jesus, and have passed her enemy's lurking-place without a flutter.

It was nearly seven o'clock when Jesus and Gladys entered the drive. There were many bright stars throbbing overhead, but the moon was only a little yellow sickle, and there was hardly light enough to guide the footsteps of the visitors.

When the drive was about half traversed, Gladys heard a light sound on the gravel, and saw a few yards in front a dark object moving towards her. She recognized it at once. It was Achilles—Achilles, loose. With a half-suppressed shriek, she clung to Jesus' arm. The cry and the movement seemed to excite the dog, for, the next moment, he uttered a short low growl of concentrated fury, and sprang forward.

Gladys shut her eyes, and pressed her head against Jesus' shoulder, waiting in silence for the cruel fangs to tear her.

But the grip seemed long in coming. She had heard it said that often the moment of

some terrible agony or some terrible suspense seemed to be drawn out into an age. She supposed this experience must be happening to her now. For the shock, the stifled yell, the rending did not come. There was an aching silence. Nothing came.

The first sensation she felt was the hand of Jesus softly stroking her hair, and the first sound she heard was the voice of Jesus, saying, in tones of loving reproach,

"My little one, my little one! where was your faith?"

His voice slew all her fears. She opened her eyes, and looked up into her Master's face, and said,

"Forgive me, blessed Jesus. I was very wicked and foolish not to trust You. I will always trust You now."

"Pray to My Father for strength to keep that promise, little one, and your life will be happy and blessed."

And now Gladys had time to find out what had become of the mastiff that, a few seconds ago, was springing at her throat.

He lay at Jesus' feet, subdued and trembling; hardly daring to lift his eyes, yet longing to

win pardon. At last, gathering courage, he crept a little further forward, laid his great head upon one sandalled foot, then turned round, and moved slowly towards his kennel.

The outer door of the Beeches was passed in the same manner as that of the College.

On entering the hall Gladys found herself standing in the midst of some little bustle. Dinner was being removed, and dessert set upon the table. Servants were hurrying to and fro, speaking as little and as lowly as possible, but not effecting the transformation without some jingling and clattering. The butler and the footman were both, more or less, patrons of Gladys's, and, when she suddenly confronted them, she could not help expecting from them some kind of greeting. But they passed within a yard of her without the smallest sign of recognition, and at length she again realized her invisibility.

Passing through the well-lighted hall, gay with its Christmas garnishing, Jesus led the little girl up the broad softly-carpeted staircase, across the landing, and along a corridor with doors opening on either side. Gaining admittance through one of the last of these,

Gladys stood within an apartment with which she was well acquainted.

It was the play-room of Ella and Leonard. A bright and cosy room it was at all times, furnished with a comfort and even an elegance by no means common in the quarters allotted to children.

The young folks had been hard at work on Christmas Eve, hanging and twining holly and ivy at all available points. To-night, too, a number of coloured wax tapers were shining among the evergreens, and six Chinese lanterns suspended from a string across the room shed a soft and pleasant light.

The table, the sofa, the chairs, and even the floor were strewn with toys and nick-nacks—the children's Christmas presents. In a dainty little berçeaunette lay a wax doll as large as a baby, and adorned with lace that would not have disgraced a fashionable lady. There was a pair of skates with all the latest improvements, a steam-engine that was moved by clockwork, a bagatelle-board, a set of ivory chessmen, a great box of soldiers. There was a Christmas-card album, and there were Christmas cards innumerable. There were

five or six gorgeously-bound story-books. There was a doll's house whose completeness of equipment would have been the envy and despair of a young couple meditating marriage. There were all these treasures, and I don't know how many treasures besides. To catalogue fully all the Christmas acquisitions of these favoured young Lancasters would take a whole chapter.

Leonard was standing with his back to the fire, and his hands in his trousers-pockets. There were many half-crowns, and one or two half-sovereigns, in those pockets, and their presence diffused a cordiality through his fingers.

Ella, at a little distance, was submitting somewhat reluctantly to the ministrations of her maid, who was smoothing the young lady's flaxen locks.

"What a bore Christmas-day is!" said Leonard, yawning desperately; "Sunday tomorrow, too! Christmas-day ought to count like Sunday, and Sunday be left cut in Christmas week."

"Come, nurse," said Ella, "you must have done with me now. How slow you are! Do let me go—you know I hate having my hair done." Leonard looked at his watch, Mr. Lancaster's Christmas present.

"Look here," he said, "it's past seven. They must be ready for us to go down to dessert. I shan't wait any longer. Come on, Ella."

"Master Leonard, pray wait till you are sent for. Your Mamma promised to send word when you were wanted, and she won't be pleased if you go down before."

"Mind your own business, Mrs. Parkinson. I can take care of myself very well, and don't want any advice from you. You are not my nurse—please to remember that. You come along, Ella."

He moved towards the door; Ella twisted herself out of her maid's hands, and was about to dart forwards to join her brother, when Mrs. Parkinson bent forward, and, laying her hand on the little girl's shoulder, whispered in her ear,

"Miss Ella, do you remember your prayers this morning?"

Ella stopped short, and a blush came over her cheeks.

"You know," the nurse went on, "you

said you'd like to say your prayers to me, because you wanted really to pray, and you thought doing that would help you. And you did pray from your heart—I'm sure you did—and you asked to be made good and gentle and obedient, like Him, born at Bethlehem to-day, Who was subject to Joseph and Mary at Nazareth. Think of your prayer, my dear, and say it again in your heart now."

Ella was quite conquered, for indeed it seemed to her that the words were not all her maid's; she could almost have believed that He of Whom the maid spoke was speaking through her lips. She could almost fancy that His Presence was even now steeping her heart in a sense of blended joy and sorrow, very strange and very sweet.

She shut her eyes, and pressed her palms together, and, standing where she was, breathed a little prayer, while tears forced their way through her lashes, and ran down her cheeks.

Leonard had opened the door, and proceeded as far as the head of the staircase. But, finding that his sister was not following him, he turned back resolved to release her from the restraints of Mrs. Parkinson. He threw open the door noisily, and was about to say some defiant words to the nurse, when his glance fell upon Ella, standing in her attitude of prayer. His glance grew into a gaze; and, as he gazed, he knew not how, the angry words went back from his lips, the angry passions melted from his heart. He waited till Ella had finished her prayer—joining in it, too, a little, I think—and then, going up to Mrs. Parkinson, put his arm round her neck, and said,

"You're a good old nurse, and it was too bad of me to treat you like that. I won't do it again."

"Don't say another word about it, Master Leonard; you're a very good-hearted boy, I'm sure, only you're a little bit thoughtless now and then. Now, Miss Ella, my dear, if you'd just put away your presents, I daresay you'd be sent for by the time you'd finished."

Ella immediately set about the work of collecting and arranging, and Leonard, anxious to show his respect for Mrs. Parkinson's authority, lent his sister vigorous masculine aid.

While Ella was carrying her sumptuous doll, reclining in her sumptuous cradle, to her place of abode, a thoughtful look came into her eyes, and she said softly to herself, "I wonder what poor little Mary would say to this doll, if she thought Alexandrina so lovely."

Alexandrina, I must explain, was Ella's third-best doll.

She went on putting her things away, but that remembrance of little Mary kept working in her heart.

Mary was the daughter of Mr. Lancaster's under-gardener. Ella had made her acquaintance two or three years ago. One day, when she was walking in the kitchen-garden, carrying Alexandrina, then the reigning favourite among her dolls, she saw a little pale face peep out from the tool-room, and follow Alexandrina with eyes which, always big, were now bigger than ever with admiration and wonder.

Ella went back and showed the little girl the doll, and even let her hold Alexandrina in her arms for a few moments. The child's curiosity and delight in the wonderful wax lady overcame her shyness, and she talked quite freely to Ella.

- "Haven't you got any dolls?" the little lady enquired.
 - "Yes, I've got one, but she's poorly."
- "Nothing very bad, is it? nothing wrong with her wax?"
 - "She hasn't got any wax."
- "Not even shoulders and arms? She must be a common thing then. I suppose she's got something the matter with her sawdust?"
- "No, she has not got any sawdust. She's all wood."
- "Poor creature! all wood! I never heard of such a thing as that. Bring her here tomorrow, will you? I should like to see her."

The doll paid her visit, and more than justified her owner's report as to her health. She was a leg short, and her features were entirely smeared away. It was believed that a little girl next door had sucked her. Her dress was simply pitiable—nothing whatever but a cotton frock and a petticoat.

Ella had never dreamed that such misfortune and destitution existed, and she was touched. From her own dolls' wardrobes she clothed this forlorn stranger, and, when the poor thing succumbed to her many infirmities, she supplied her place by a humble retainer of her own, and won thereby little Mary's undying gratitude.

Since then Ella had often seen the gardener's little daughter, sometimes in the garden, whither she had come to bring her father's dinner or tea, sometimes at her home. Mary had always been a delicate child, and of late she had seemed to Ella to be paler and thinner every time they met. Her eyes were wonderfully large and bright, and the rings under them grew continually darker and deeper.

Now, as Ella was putting her doll away for the night, she remembered that she had been told in the morning that Mary was very ill indeed. The news had come to her during the excitement of unwrapping that very doll, and had made little impression upon her. She now thought remorsefully that Mary had been lying in pain all that day, and that she had never given her even a passing remembrance.

Her heart was very tender and compassionate towards little Mary now—for that sense of a holy, loving Presence at her side, had not passed away, but rather had deepened.

In the pity and protection which that Presence afforded her, her own want of pity and protection to little Mary seemed very selfish and Her cheeks burned with shame when she thought how differently her Christmas-day and Mary's had been spent. She had awaked to a delightful sense of anticipation and excitement. The clothes in which Mrs. Parkinson. arrayed her were new and charming. The presents which everybody who knew her had showered upon her surpassed all previous experiences. She had eaten all kinds of delicacies. and now she was about to be summoned to sit by her Papa's side, to be petted, and applauded, and helped to whatever costly dainty she fancied. Mary-oh, how had Mary spent her Christmas-day? Lying on a sick-bed, in pain and weakness, in loneliness, perhaps even in hunger-for Mary's father, alas! though a good and clever gardener, was not a good father. He drank sometimes, Mary had told Ella, and then he always neglected his little daughter, and often was cruel to her. Mary had no mother, and no brother or sister; and, child as she was, and delicate as she was, had to keep her father's house. So that, unless

someone, kinder than Ella, had taken compassion on the poor little thing, she might have lain, helpless and faint for want of food, all that Christmas-day. Think of spending Christmas-day so! Think of moaning weakly to one's self, and longing for someone to smooth one's pillow, and hold a drink of water to one's lips, while the postman's jolly rat-rat was passing down the street, and the Christmas bells were bursting into a golden clash of joy!

Ella could bear the thought no longer. She crept up to Mrs. Parkinson, laid her head in her good nurse's motherly bosom, and sobbed piteously.

"What is it, my lamb?" asked Mrs. Parkinson, kissing her pet, and stroking her hair, and trying to soothe her in all kinds of experienced, motherly ways, "tell me all about it, my lamb, and we'll soon make it all right—you see if we don't."

Gladys, standing at her side, longed to comfort her friend, and to tell her how she loved her for her tenderness of heart. But this she could not do. She was there to observe and to learn, and not to take any part in what was being done.

But One did comfort the little girl. Whose Presence had shed into her heart that sweet pity and that loving remorse, moved softly to her side, and poured oil and wine into the blessed wound which His grace had inflicted.

Ella ceased to sob. She grew calm, and when she lifted up her face there was a look in it so bright, so tender, so beautiful, that it made the nurse almost afraid.

- "I've been thinking about little Mary, nurse dear," she said; "I'm going to ask Mamma to let me go to her to-night, and to take her my doll,"
- "I don't believe Mamma will let you go tonight," said Leonard, who had been a silent and puzzled spectator of the little scene.
- "Oh yes," Ella replied impetuously; "I'm sure she will when she knows how much I long to. You'll ask for me, too, won't you Leonard? and dear old nurse will come with me, and then I know I shall get leave."
- "All right," said Leonard, "I'll help you as much as ever I can; and—I say, Ella, I should like to go with you, and I wonder if Mamma would let me give Mary my money."

He opened his purse, and shook all its contents into his palm. Then he raked the loose silver out of his pocket.

- "Two pounds two and six altogether," he said.
- "My dear boy," exclaimed Mrs. Parkinson, "you don't suppose your Mamma will allow you to give all your money away, even if she allows you to go out to-night, which I don't for a moment believe she will."
- "Don't say anything against it, Mrs. Parkinson, please don't say anything against it; I've never done any good in all my life, and I do want to begin: oh, I do so want to begin."
- "No, please, please, don't say anything against it. We've never done any good—not any—in all our long, long lives, and we must begin at once."

The nurse stooped down and kissed Ella in a way that told her that her pleading had prevailed.

At this moment the footman gave the expected summons to dessert, and the children hurried down stairs.

The unseen visitants silently followed.

CHAPTER IX.

LEONARD AND ELLA GET LEAVE TO BE AS SILLY AS EVER THEY PLEASE.

THE Lancasters' dining-room was as pleasant and comfortable an apartment as could well be desired. As Gladys noiselessly entered. and gazed round on the party sitting at dessert, she thought she had never seen so complete a picture of luxurious snugness. The fire was bright, but not oppressive; the light was full, but not glaring. The table was spread with all the choicest products of the Italian warehouse; green and rose-coloured glass reflected softened tints upon the snowy tablecloth; the wine in the decanters contrasted pleasantly their hues of pale-gold and claret. Round the cloth was trailed, in homage to the season, a delicate wreath of small brown green-veined ivy, relieved here and there with little spikes of coral-beaded holly. A profusion of cut flowers graced the Christmas festivity with the colours and scents of summer.

The party consisted of eight persons, of whom, besides the host and hostess, Gladys recognized only one. This was the young clergyman, Mr. Smith, whose sermon in the morning had made so strong an impression on When Gladys entered the room, he was talking to a bright eyed girl of eighteen who sat on his right hand. His face looked very worn and thin, but his eyes were singularly bright, and Gladys was glad to see that he had a good deal of colour on his cheeks now. Poor child! she did not know what brought the colour there. Gladys felt a strange thrill of excitement at seeing him again. His words that morning had opened a new world to her; she had lived so much since then, that she could hardly realize that they had been spoken only a few hours ago. She was very glad to have one more opportunity of looking in his In some mysterious way it had been borne in upon her that his brief earthly course was very nearly run, and that she would see him no more. It was not the wasted frame and the hectic flush that told this—the latter indeed she interpreted as a hopeful sign; but some prescient whisper of her heart made his

early death a certainty to her. She knew that the light within his face was more of heaven than of earth, and that soon the perfect light of heaven would irradiate it.

As the Presence of Jesus passed into the room, an exquisite change came over the young man's face. The weakness and fatigue gave way to a soft "rapture of repose," unspeakably holy and beautiful. Mrs. Lancaster's face, too, Gladys thought, grew more sweet and tender; no one else in the room appeared to have any sense of the Divine Presence.

"There's a place for you, Leonard, by your mother," Mr. Lancaster said. "Ella, my pet, you come and sit by me. Why, what's the matter with my little girl?" he went on. "She has been crying, I declare. Tears on Christmas Day will never do; you must have a glass of port wine,—that will soon put you right."

He poured out a glass of wine for her, and one for Leonard, and helped them both to the candied fruits.

"Mamma," said Leonard, "will you promise me something?"

"Oh yes, Mamma," Ella put in, "do promise!"

"I never make promises without knowing what they are. Tell me what you want, my dears."

"I want," said Leonard, "to give all my money and presents—every one of them—and Ella wants to give all hers, to poor children who haven't had any presents to-day, and who have had nothing nice to eat, and no pleasure at all; and we want to go out, now, this very minute, and carry all the things to them, in a big basket."

This bestowal of all the presents had not been mooted between the children before, and was the sudden suggestion of Leonard's impetuous generosity. But Ella was in no mood to urge objections, and she supported her brother's plea by throwing her arms round Mr. Lancaster's neck, and crying,

"Oh, dear Papa, do ask Mamma to let us give the things away!"

"Why, my dear, good little girl," the father replied, "whatever has come over you? Give all your splendid presents away? Your gorgeous new story-books, and your doll's-

house! And that Empress of a doll! Why, you almost cried your eyes out when your last doll had an accident. If I were to let you give the things away, you would want them all back to-morrow."

The clergyman had turned round and was looking at Ella with an expression of pleased interest.

"She is a noble little girl," he said to his next neighbour.

Ella caught the words, and gathered fresh courage and insistence from them.

"Papa," she said, "do, do let me; I do so want to give them away—I never wanted anything so much in my life. Poor little Mary's very, very ill, and, if anything will do her good, I'm sure the doll will." Her cheeks flushed, and tears came into her eyes, as she went on, "I've been dreadfully cruel and selfish; I've been enjoying myself all day, and have never once thought of poor Mary, and the only thing I can do to make me forget how bad I've been, is to give her the doll-and everything I've got, everything."

Mr. Lancaster looked a little touched by Ella's appeal.

"My dear," he said, "I'll tell you what we will do. You and Leonard shall each give half-a-crown, and we will buy Mary a doll in the morning,—a nice, plain, modest kind of doll. A poor child like that would not know what to do with such a splendid lady as yours."

Ella burst into tears, and Leonard looked as though a very little extra provocation would make him follow her example.

"Don't check their generous impulse," said the clergyman, addressing Mr. Lancaster.

"No, I should be very sorry to do that. But, my dear sir, what is the use of their giving all their handsome presents away—to a child who would not understand or value them."

"We don't want to give them all to Mary, father," Leonard said. "We want to make as many poor children as we can, happy on Christmas Day."

"Perhaps," said Mr. Smith, "the presents may not be very suitable, but never mind that; it is for your children's sakes that I would ask you to let the presents be made. If the giving enriches nobody else, it will certainly

enrich them. They want to give, not what they can spare, but what they value most their best and their all. Surely, that is a feeling to be encouraged—and most of all on Christmas Day."

The clergyman's pleading prevailed. Indeed, Mr. Lancaster was not sorry for once in a way to find an excuse for letting sentiment triumph over common-sense.

"Mamma," he said to his wife, "we must let them have their way. Mr. Smith's in the conspiracy against reason, and I see that all our other friends are quite ready to join it, too. We shall have to give way, I see; so let us do it with a good grace."

"We may go then?" cried Ella, breaking into a joyful dance. "Oh, thank you, Papa! you are the best and kindest papa living."

"But look here, Leonard and Ella. One thing before you go. Mind, when you have given away your money and treasures, it will be of no use to discover that you can't do without them, and to come to me, wanting new dolls and new pocketfuls of money. If you give them away at all, it shall be a real present and a real sacrifice."

"Yes, Papa, we quite understand that," both the children replied.

"Now then, my dears," said Mr. Lancaster, "since you are to go, you had better go at once. Tell Mrs. Parkinson to wrap you up as carefully as possible, and say that I should be much obliged if she would take care of you."

Leonard bounded up stairs, followed by Ella, to tell the joyful news, and to make the necessary arrangements. Mrs. Parkinson, wild as she considered the expedition, could not help being pleased with the children's impetuous kindness, and was not sorry that it was to be allowed for once to flow unchecked.

In a few moments she and the youngsters, wrapped and furred, like Arctic explorers, were ready to face the weather. Then the packing began. It was soon proved to be impossible to cram into any basket, or into any series of baskets which could be carried by the adventurers, all the Christmas presents. The children were therefore reluctantly compelled to leave to a future occasion the distribution of a considerable number of their treasures. They managed, however, to squeeze into the space

at their disposal all the more valuable ones, and all that they prized most highly. They were determined, since they could not to-night give their all, to give at any rate their best. Leonard carried a great wicker basket, stuffed so full that the lid would hardly shut down at ' all: Mrs. Parkinson, a smaller basket and a lantern; Ella, her splendid new doll, sleeping -was it not lucky the poor thing never woke up at all?—in her regal berceaunette. There was a tear in dolly's eye. Not of her own weeping-Ella had dropped it there. Glad as she was-eager as she was-to make over to Mary this peerless creature, she could not refrain from that natural mark of sorrow at parting from her, as she kissed her, and laid her down.

As the little party passed the dining-room door, Mrs. Lancaster came out to see the start.

"All warm and snug, I see," she said. "Good-bye, my pets, and God bless you. Leonard, can you make room for this?"

"It's a pretty tight fit already," he said, "but I think I can just do with it. What is it, Mamma?"

"It's jelly and a few little things that I

thought poor Mary would like, with some sweets for the other children. Don't press it too hard."

With some difficulty Leonard found a resting-place for the package.

"All right now," he said; "come on, Mrs. Parkinson; come on, Ella."

The trio moved briskly down the drive. Unseen, two shadows followed them.



CHAPTER X.

A SLIPPERY WALK, A WICKER BASKET, AND A PLEASANT FAMILY GATHERING.

UGH! how the wind did tear down the road! How the world did seem settling down into an iceberg! Verily, whose would face the weather that night, had need of stout heart and vigorous circulation. Luckily, our little party was possessed of these requisites—of the former, at any rate. I don't believe the youngsters knew that there was a wind at all, or that the thermometer was doing anything unusual. Leonard even remarked that it was a grand night for a walk; whereto Ella replied, "Isn't it? So delightfully slippery." Mrs. Parkinson succeeded in saying that she supposed it was very seasonable, and, in saying that, felt that she had gone as far as strict veracity would carry her. You see, she wasn't going to give her doll to little Mary, and consequently did not possess any charm against the malice of the weather. The slipperiness which Ella found so agreeable was not equally attractive to Mrs. Parkinson. When one is forty-five, and not thin, a tumble on the icy road begins to lose the edge of its fascination. The good nurse set her teeth, and butted her head against the wind, moving with caution and good heed, and thereby trying Leonard's patience not a little.

Ella—her small arms somewhat embarrassed with the bulk of her cradle—when the first excitement of having actually started on the expedition had passed away, began to think, not regretfully, but tenderly, of the approaching parting between herself and her doll. She stopped once or twice, under convenient lamps, to print a kiss on dolly's delicate waxen cheek, and by talking cheerily to her darling, tried to conquer a little sinking at her own heart.

"Think, dolly," she said, "how fond of you Mary will be! and what a pet she'll make of you! and think, too, what a comfort you'll be to her. Yes, dolly, be virtuous, and you will be happy—it's in the copy-book, and you wouldn't contradict the copy-book, would you?"

Ten minutes' walking brought our friends within sight of the row of cottages at which

their operations were to begin. In the first cottage lived Thompson, the coachman, who had several indefinite children, and one definite boy, George Peter. It was felt that on this occasion the latter must be provided for, and something done for the former.

Leonard's rap at the door brought Thompson himself, in his shirt-sleeves and smoking a short black clay.

"Bless us, Master Leonard," the coachman exclaimed on recognising his visitors, "who'd have thought of seeing you at this time of night! Any orders about the carriage, sir?"

"No, nothing about the carriage. It's just a little matter of business that has brought us. Is George Peter in?"

"Certainly he is. Do you want to see him? Come in, please—and you, Miss, and you, Ma'am. Excuse my shirt-sleeves—this is quite a domestic occasion, you know."

"Now don't you put yourself about, Mr. Thompson," the nurse replied. "We'll take you just as we find you, and it's we that ought to apologise for breaking in on you at such an unchristian hour."

The room into which the visitors were ad-

mitted was as bright and snug as a room could be. A fragrant, but uncertain, waft that met them on the threshold, became manifestly sausages as they advanced. Mrs. Thompson had apparently just been ministering to the necessities of those sputtering delicacies, for she still held a fork in her hand. Peter, on the contrary, held the baby, who ought to have been asleep, but who was surveying all that was going on, wide-eyed, but good as gold. The second hope of the Thompsons, conveniently sexed and sized so as to grow into George Peter's garments just as George Peter grew out of them, was dividing his attention, as impartially as the fragrance of the latter permitted, between the baby and the sausages. All the other little Thompsons were snugly tucked by twos in their little white beds.

There was visible sensation as the head of the house introduced the visitors. The only thoroughly self-possessed member of the family was the baby, who, having got a comfortable grip of George Peter's hair, surveyed the strangers with careless complacency. Mrs. Thompson, unused to contact with the great,

20.

.

See page 109..



was very much ruffled by this influx of the gentry, and seemed to feel the fork acutely. George Peter, too, conscious that he was in request, was a good deal embarrassed, and glad to have the baby as a screen for his emotions.

Chairs, at Mrs. Thompson's bidding, being set for the quality by the younger boy, Leonard opened the mission by saying, "I say, George Peter, have you got a knife?"

The boy made no sign except by retiring a little further behind the baby.

"Why don't you speak to the young gentleman, sir?" Mrs. Thompson interposed. "Tell him that you had a very nice knife, only you've broke the blade."

Thus urged George Peter peeped partially out, and intimated blushingly that his mother had put the case fairly.

"Then," said Leonard, drawing his knife from his pocket, and blushing in his turn, "I wish you'd have this. Do, there's a good fellow, and I'll be no end obliged. It's got three rattling good blades, you see, and here's an awfully handy thing to get stones out of a horse's hoof, and here's a corkscrew, and this is a file, and this is a saw—isn't it a jolly little

saw?—and I don't know what this is for—something handy, though—and this is a button-hook."

He put the knife into the hand of the boy, whose shyness was almost conquered by delight.

"Oh, thank you, sir—thank you," he said, gazing, with an ecstatic grin, at the wonderful implement that, with its many conveniences standing out at all angles, like so many bright legs, looked like a brilliant centipede. "I say, Billy," turning to his brother, "ain't it a stunner?"

To free his hands for further explorations, Mrs. Thompson relieved George Peter of the baby, and the two boys' heads were soon blending their curls over the delightful pocket toolchest, while Leonard was whispering to Ella, "It's your turn now. Fire away."

After a whispered consultation with Mrs. Parkinson, Ella, with a little blush, addressed herself to the second boy, whose part hitherto had been only to try and not be jealous of his brother's good fortune.

"Master Billy," she said, "this great basket is full of things—all sorts of things—and

perhaps it would be best if you would choose something from it, because if I were to choose something for you, you might not care about it. Leonard never likes the same things that I do."

"Why, bless us, Miss," exclaimed Thompson, "you're not going to make Billy a present, too! I never heard the like of this. You'll fair spoil the boys, that you will."

"No, no; no fear of that," said Mrs. Parkinson; "good boys ar'n't so easy spoilt, and Christmas comes but once a year, you know."

Ella had now, with the help of Leonard, displayed upon the table, with the view of facilitating Billy's selection, some of the more attractive contents of the basket. Billy, pushed forward by his brother, advanced slowly, with his head down, and his fist partially swallowed. The exhibition was, indeed, one that made choice difficult. There can, in a well-balanced mind, be no possible doubt as to the abstract desirability of a box of soldiers, with two terrific field-pieces, peas sufficient to make a pudding, or to lay thousands low, two regiments of Turks with sabres and turbans, and two of great-coated Russians. But is such a box of

soldiers desirable when its selection involves the rejection of a steam-engine that goes by clockwork, and a pair of skates in which you can go like steam? The question is a hard Splendidly-bound books, too, though obviously not to be chosen, yet help to confuse and hamper one's choice. Poor Billy was quite unequal to the difficulties of his position. After an inward struggle of some severity, he determined to abandon the skates. His selection, therefore, lay between the soldiers and the steam-engine. But between these two he bade fair to share the fate of the donkey between the two trusses of hay. At length, with a great sigh, he said resolutely, "I'll have the soldiers;" but, even as he spoke, the bright funnel of the steam-engine, and its name, "Flying Dutchman," engraved in bold letters, caught his eye, and, still hugging the box, he exclaimed, "No, I won't: I'll have the engine."

"You must let him have both," said Mrs. Parkinson, and this suggestion was adopted as the only way out of the difficulty. Then Leonard felt that the bestowal of the double portion would exalt the younger over the elder

brother, and, to place the pair on an equal footing, presented George Peter with the skates.

It was at this moment that a "My gracious! look there!" from the head of the house drew all eyes in the direction indicated. A startling apparition presented itself.

Clustered together on the last two steps of the stairs that led out of the sitting-room, with little red toes peeping from under their night-gowns, with eyes round with astonishment, and mouths opened in intense silence, stood those four little Thompsons; Emma, John, Dick, and Sarah Emily, who, an hour and a half ago, had had their bread and milk, and said their prayers, and been undressed, and stowed away in their virtuous beds, with the injunction to "go to sleep that very moment."

Mrs. Thompson, with an indignant fire in her eyes, sprang from her chair. The infantry fell into instantaneous confusion, and an expectant yell burst unanimously from their lips.

"You mustn't be cross with them, Mrs. Thompson," pleaded Ella's nurse. "You really

mustn't. This is Christmas Day. Poor things, you couldn't be hard upon them on Christmas Day."

"Such goings on I never did see," said Mrs. Thompson, doubtfully.

"They heard the strange voices, and they wanted to see what was going on, that's all. Why, what a little pet that youngest is." Mrs. Parkinson sallied forth, and captured Sarah Emily, who, feeling that the crisis had taken a favourable turn, immediately recovered all her pertness, and, not a bit ashamed of her bare toes, sat snugly on the nurse's lap.

In fact the issue of the matter was that all the children were covered up in their father's great-coat, and that one of the largest and juiciest of the sausages was divided among them, after which Ella presented them with the bound volume of "Little Folks" for that year—to be kept by their mother till Emma was old enough to read it to the others,—and with a large packet of most tempting sweets. And so, with a sugar-plum in each of their mouths, the little Thompsons were reconsigned to bed.

And now, at a hint from Mrs. Parkinson,

Leonard rose to say good-bye, and our little party, glad to escape from too effusive gratitude, retired hastily, and left the coachman's family to their supper.

Two shadows, which had passed into the house with the visitors, passed away with them.

In the last house of that same row of cottages of which the Thompsons' was the first, lived another person, who, the children considered, had claims upon their bounty. This was Mrs. Thwaites, the laundress. Of course it was not proposed to delight Mrs. Thwaites herself—a widow of more than middle age—with a box of bricks or a puzzle, but it was known to Mrs. Parkinson that the laundress had a little girl, Lydia, of an age to rejoice in such things. At Mrs. Thwaites's, therefore, the party halted next, and made Lydia happy, and her mother tearful, with a doll that had seen better days, and a packet of sweets.

Three other visits were paid, and at each the baskets and one or two young hearts were made lighter. And now there remained nothing to bestow, except those treasures

which had been specially reserved for little Mary.

The house where she lived was not a quarter of a mile distant from that at which our friends had made their last call. In five or six minutes' time, Leonard was knocking gently for admittance.



CHAPTER XI.

JESUS COMES TO LITTLE MARY.

AFTER a short interval, the door was opened by a girl of about Ella's age, who stared in some confusion at the visitors.

"She is not alone then," said Mrs. Parkinson, "I am glad of that." Then, addressing the girl, "My dear, we have come to see poor little Mary, and to bring her one or two little things that may do her good. Is she well enough to see us, do you think?"

"Oh yes," exclaimed Ella, "I am sure she would like to see us. You don't know what I've got for her; but it's something delightful. We may come in, mayn't we?"

A little weak voice from within here made itself heard. "Let them in, Sally dear, it's Miss Ella."

"There," said Ella, joyfully. "she knows my voice, and she wants to see me."

"Gently, my child," whispered Mrs. Parkinson, laying an admonitory hand on Ella's shoulder; "we must be very careful not

to excite Mary. Sick people can't bear excitement. Be very quiet, and don't talk too much, or you might do her a great deal of harm."

"Yes, nurse," replied Ella, "I will be very careful."

"This way, if you please," said Sally, holding a candle before them, and the party passed into the cottage.

Those two shadowy forms, that had followed everywhere the steps of the ministering children, entering as they entered, and leaving as they left, were now upon the threshold. But ere they crossed it, Jesus, taking the hand of His little maid in His, said to her: "Pause one moment, my child, and ask My Father that what you are about to see may abide in your heart."

Gladys looked upward. The solemn sky was sown with pulsing stars. One star, intenser than all the rest, seemed as if, at every throb, it would burst from heaven. She fancied that this must be that eastern star which led the first pilgrims to Him at whose side she now stood. She prayed, and thought she could almost see her prayer ascending like her breath, and floating to that star.

"Come, my child," said Jesus,—and they passed into the cottage.

Little Mary, propped up in her bed with pillows, held out a weak, welcoming hand to Ella.

"I am glad you are come," she said, speaking with difficulty; "somehow I thought you would come."

Ella pressed the poor, thin, white hand, with its great blue veins, and said, "Yes, I've come, dear Mary. Are you very, very poorly?"

"She was very bad all day, Miss," said Sally straightening the pillows and smoothing the bed-clothes officiously; "but she's a good bit better now. I made her a cup of tea just now, and she's been a deal cheerfuller ever since. She couldn't take more than a spoonful or two, but that did her a deal of good."

"Sally has been very good to me," said Mary; "I don't know what I should have done without her."

"Who is Sally?" whispered Ella to Mary.

"Just a neighbour, Miss," Sally answered for her. "I knew as the poor thing had nobody to do for her, so I come in."

Mrs. Parkinson, thinking that it was better not to obtrude on the sick child any unaccustomed presence, had taken a seat near the door, and drawn Leonard into a chair beside her. Sally, gradually gathering that her ministrations somewhat disturbed the little patient's communion with her friend, withdrew from the bed-side, and busied herself with boiling the kettle.

"Dear, dear Mary!" said Ella, kissing the little white face, on which excitement had brought two spots of colour, and from which the great eyes shone out like stars—"you'll soon be better, won't you?"

"Yes, very soon," said Mary. "What are they ringing the bells for?"

Ella listened. "There are no bells ringing, Mary dear," she said.

"Oh yes, you must hear them. I have heard the bells ringing all day.—There! didn't you hear that great peal?"

Ella shook her head.

"There are no bells, Mary. They were ringing a little time ago — Christmas bells, telling us that Christ was born. But they've stopped a long time ago."

"I hear them now," said Mary, "beautiful bells! I think the angels are ringing them."

Her eyes seemed to burn into the darkness, as she spoke, and a strange smile grew on her lips.

Ella felt a little frightened. She thought that Mary was becoming light-headed. She left the bedside for one moment, and took the doll out of its cradle.

"Mary," she said, returning softly to the bed, "I have brought you my doll. Isn't she a beauty?

The sick child lifted her hands to take the beautiful being, but they dropped weakly to her side.

"Lay her on the bed," she said, "where I can see her."

Ella laid the doll down.

A soft delight came over Mary's face as her eyes took in the flaxen hair, the rosy cheeks, and the baby smile of the beautiful doll.

She touched lovingly the waxen arm that lay nearest to her, and said, half to herself,

"She is like one of the angels that rings the bells!"

She lay thus for some little time, gazing, with a face of quiet content, at her wonderful fairy visitor. She was too weak, poor child,

to feel any great surprise, but the doll's presence at her side made her very happy. Then, a sudden fit of coughing seized her, so sharp and so convulsive, that it seemed each moment as if it must snap her fragile clay asunder. Sally supported her in her strong little arms, and encouraged her in an old-fashioned, motherly manner; and after a little while the paroxysm passed away, and the poor child lay back quiet and exhausted.

After an interval of some few minutes, she said,

"You told me the bells were ringing for the birth of Christ. I should like to hear about Him. Will you read to me, Miss Ella?"

Sally dusted the great Bible—though it stood in no need of that operation—and brought it to Ella at the bedside.

Ella had never in her life read aloud to any one, but her mother, a passage from the Bible; and on any ordinary occasion, she would have recoiled from the idea of so public a display of her powers; but now all self-consciousness had passed away from her. She opened the book almost at random, and, her eyes falling on the holy name of Jesus, she read straight on,

assured, she knew not how, that her selection would be appropriate.

"Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you."

"Oh!" exclaimed little Mary, raising herself suddenly, and stretching out her hands—
"He is here now! He is dressed like a carpenter-boy. He isn't like what I have seen Him in the pictures, but I know it is Jesus. I know Him by His beautiful eyes, and by the halo round His hair. Oh! the bells.—Jesus—Blessed Jesus! Thou art come for me. I am not afraid. I have often done wrong, but Thou did'st die for me. Thou dost love me, Jesus! Oh, the bells! So happy. For ever with Jesus."

She strained her thin arms forward, an ecstatic smile made her face as the face of an angel. With one soft sigh, she fell backward, and little Mary was for ever with Jesus.

Yes, indeed with Jesus. At that moment, the eyes of all present saw, and saw without fear or surprise, Jesus, clad, as Mary had described Him, like a carpenter-boy, standing with loving eyes and welcoming arms beside the bed.

A few minutes later, a wretched father, who

had staggered into the room, ignorant of what had happened, and had been suddenly sobered by the greeting, "It's all over with Mary," was kneeling in anguish beside that bed, pressing the chill, listless hands, kissing, and wetting with his tears, the wasted cheeks, imploring a word of forgiveness from those lips upon which the great silence had settled. Christ help thee, wretched father, and speak to thy soul, purified by baptismal tears, that pardon thy child can never speak here!

* * * * *

Afternoon tea had come and gone; the street lamps had leapt into flame; the church bells had chimed and ceased; the grim winter night had closed in upon the world, when Gladys entered the drawing-room.

Mrs. Arnold was sitting there alone, reading. "Well, my little girl," she said, laying down her book; "so you have made your appearance at last. I came to your door to listen, two hours ago, and everything was so still that I knew you must be asleep; and I thought a little sleep would do you good, so I did not disturb you. You look very pale and cold, my child,—do you not feel well?"

"Quite well, mother," said Gladys, walking up to her mother's chair, and putting her arm round her neck,—"Quite well, mother; but I was not asleep when you came."

"Not asleep! why, my dear little girl, what are you thinking about? I waited on the landing for five minutes, and there was not the least sound from your room. And then I opened the door, very gently, and whispered, 'Gladys, tea is ready.' The room was quite dark then, and I could not see you; but you made no answer, and so I knew you must be asleep."

"Mother dear," said Gladys, pressing her mother's hand, and rubbing her cheek against the dear forehead, "indeed I was not asleep. I have been — I don't know how to tell you"——

Turning quickly in her chair, the mother looked into her little daughter's eyes, and saw in them an expression which she had never seen there before; a look of wistful, pleading awe. It made her feel a little alarmed; and drawing Gladys closer to her, and taking both her hands in hers, she said, "Don't be afraid, my dear; you must not

hide any feeling from your mother; tell me everything."

"Mother," Gladys replied, in a low tone of solemn conviction, "I have been with Jesus."

Mrs. Arnold made no answer, and Gladys went on. "I lay down on the sofa after dinner, and I went to sleep a little. Before I awoke, I knew that someone was standing by me, and when I opened my eyes, I saw it was Jesus; and He told me that I had prayed this morning, and that He had come to me in answer to my prayer. Oh, he was so kind and loving, mother, and His presence made me feel so happy and good,—He told me that He was always near me, and near everyone who prayed, and tried to be good; but he had come to-day, because it was His birthday, to bless boys and girls, and to draw them nearer to Him. He wasn't like what He is in the pictures, mother; He was a boy, not much older than me. took me with Him, and we went to the College and comforted poor master Morton, and then we went to Ella Lancaster's; and oh, mother, poor little Mary is dead; Jesus took her, and she is happy now."

Mrs. Arnold was deeply impressed with

Gladys's evident conviction of the truth of what she was telling. She felt sure that her child was only relating the impressions of a singularly vivid dream; but its experiences seemed to have entered so deeply into her heart, and were besides so beautiful and holy, that she dared not try to uproot them by expressing what she felt. She said nothing, but kissed her child, and stroked her hair with a loving hand, feeling that sympathy was the best thing she could give her now.

After a little interval, she said, "Gladys, I have a pleasant surprise for you. I have found out through one of the servants that poor little Morton is left alone at school, and I have asked Mr. Ritson to let him spend the rest of his holidays with us. He will be here early to-morrow, I expect."

"Thank you, mother dear," Gladys replied.
"I was going to ask you to let him come. I saw him at the College to-night; he was very lonely before Jesus comforted him, but he is quite happy now. Mother!" she went on, looking into Mrs. Arnold's eyes, "doesn't all this—doesn't my knowing about him—prove that I haven't been dreaming?"

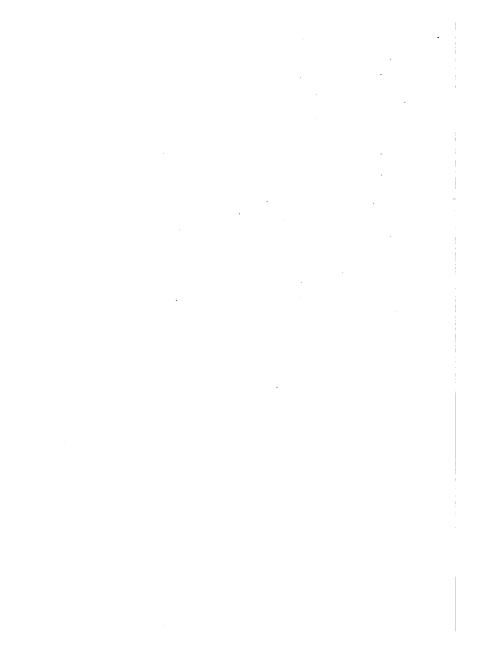
Thenceforward, from that happy Christmas Day, the idea of the Saviour, -not as One hidden by rolling clouds in a far, awful sky, with ears too stunned with seraph-anthems to catch the weak cry of struggling souls on earth, but as One very loving, very helpful, very near, One, once a child, and still sympathizing in the lessons and the games, the joys and the sorrows of boys and girls, as well as in that deeper life of manhood to which He grew, -strengthened and ripened in Gladys's heart. Her prayers were never repetitions of forms learned by rote, but very outpourings of her soul into an ear always bowed down to listen, and a heart always ready to understand and help. Nothing was trifling or meaningless to her now; everything in life was more solemn, yet richer and brighter too; she did not become a premature woman, but she became a prayerful earnest Christian child. All who came into close contact with her took knowledge of her, that she had been with Jesus,—nay, more than that,—that Jesus was with her still.

THE END.

___________. .

.

.



.

